

## MEMO TWO

# Guiding Pathways: Dual Credit Paves the Way

In response to a call for regional collaboration to improve college-going rates across the region, UP Partnership (UP) and Region 20 Education Service Center (Region 20) created the Guiding Pathways (GP) project. GP is a collaboration between institutions of higher education, local school districts, and nonprofit partners working to increase the number of students completing high quality Dual Credit courses.

Funded by the Greater Texas Foundation, GP strives to create equitable completion of Dual Credit courses through strategies that improve alignment between and within secondary and postsecondary institutions. Over the two-year grant period, the GP project has engaged 110 educators and administrators from 18 partner organizations, representing a cross-sector commitment to collaboration. The project operates through four key pillars: curriculum vertical alignment teams, operational vertical alignment teams, outreach, and advocacy. Grounded in the theory of collective impact, Region 20 and UP developed the GP project to build capacity of Independent School Districts (ISDs) to improve curricular alignment with Institutions of Higher Ed (IHEs), and

increase student and family awareness of benefits of dual credit to maximize postsecondary enrollment, persistence, and completion.

### **Curriculum Vertical Alignment Teams (CVAT)**

UP and Region 20 gathered ISD and IHE partners to establish concrete goals, shared language, and committed campus leaders. One immediate and critical need that continued to surface was creating alignment between ISD and IHE curriculums. Educators, especially at the IHE level, reported “academic gaps” present in students enrolling in postsecondary education even among those who successfully completed a Dual Credit course. To give educators space to collaborate, UP and Region 20 established CVAT as one of the first actions of GP. CVAT brought together secondary and postsecondary faculty to improve curricular alignment in Math and English courses. CVAT activities centered around determining gaps and misalignment in curriculum between grade levels and ensuring students are a) more prepared for Dual Credit and higher education courses, and b) have learned the material in an intentional & chronological way.

Over the two-year GP grant period (2018-2020), CVAT held a total of 20 meetings to bring together participants from across 10 ISDs and 8 IHEs. Overall, 110 unique participants attended at least one GP meeting. Throughout the CVAT meetings, participants reviewed and aligned their course' syllabi and connected related course learning objectives. Additionally, UP and Region 20 decided to pilot a "train-the-trainer" model to empower CVAT participants to go back to their campuses and develop more vertical alignment teams to strengthen their Dual Credit programs. As one CVAT member stated about the impact of the CVAT, "Everyone [who participated in CVAT] who is in a classroom instructional role or instructional support role has full understanding of what the learning objectives and student outcomes are for a particular course." UP and Region 20 ensured that the space created for ISDs and IHEs to work together not only improved current syllabi and course content, but also created a sustainable model to ensure future collaboration across educational systems.

### **Operations Vertical Alignment Teams (OVAT)**

Alongside the CVAT, UP and Region 20 developed OVAT to ensure that changes happening inside the classroom could be supported outside the classroom. OVAT brought together key decision-makers within ISD and IHE partner organizations who agreed to participate in, support, and champion the GP project at their campuses and districts. OVAT activities centered on determining how to allocate resources to best support CVAT activities. Additionally, Region 20 recognized that granular issues needed to be tackled in smaller, focused groups and so created "Backyard VATs" to help. Backyard VATs

worked in small groups or partner pairings to address student needs between specific campuses. The GP project convened seven OVAT and eight related "Backyard VATs," bringing a total of 79 unique participants together from across six ISDs and five IHEs. Several of the OVAT meetings were combined with the CVAT meetings to ensure cohesiveness was reached between the VATs. This allowed OVAT or CVAT members to work on larger projects while "Backyard VATs" took on granular, organization-specific concerns. As one IHE participant stated, "Communication between college and high school teachers is crucial."

### **Outreach and Awareness**

Region 20 and UP set an early goal of improving alignment, but also pushed toward direct outreach to students to increase awareness and access to dual credit courses. Early on in the process, and alongside UP's Diplomías Network, Region 20 and UP developed a number of outreach materials intended to extend beyond the life of the GP project. These materials include a graphic comic book aimed at a student audience that communicates the benefits of Dual Credit, and how to enroll and prepare for Dual Credit in an informative and engaging way. A communications toolkit was also developed for counselors to educate students and families on how to prepare for and make optimal decisions about Dual Credit coursework. These tools, along with Diplomías Network's Dual Credit Handbook, were designed to help everyone involved in the college readiness process, from counselors and administrators to students and parents.

Through in-person and virtual events, UP and Region 20 teams disseminated

the aforementioned resources to a wide and diverse audience. Over the term of the grant, the GP teams distributed the resources to over 350 individuals at social hours, youth summits, college resource fairs, professional development training, and higher education forums. Additionally, UP launched a coordinated social media and targeted online advertising campaign in the summer of 2020 to disseminate GP materials and resources across its networks. These materials shared information and focused on communicating that Dual Credit, and therefore higher education, was possible and accessible.

Though the world-wide pandemic forced most of the participants to make large pivots in how they conducted presentations, facilitated collaboration, and enabled content dissemination, UP and Region 20 ensured as best as they could that the mission of improving alignment and increasing accessibility could be realized.

### **Advocacy and Sustainability**

Present throughout all GP meetings was intentional language around project sustainability. UP and Region 20 acknowledged at the project's inception that the grant funding was finite and needed to develop lasting change across educational entities. To ensure this goal was met, UP and Region 20 increased the capacity of partners to be able to implement the work indefinitely, independent of funding mechanisms or policy decisions and created lasting materials based on input from subject matter experts who were engaged with the process. Additionally, UP and Region 20 had ongoing discussions about what policies needed to be present at system levels to ensure both project sustainability and project improvement. Through policy

memos and robust implementation guidelines, GP will continue to serve as an example of a multi-layered approach to Dual Credit program improvement.

### **Recommendations**

GP was developed, implemented, and evaluated in a relatively short time frame and almost a quarter of the grant happened during a world-wide pandemic. While the numbers of participants, and the regional collaboration was a critical step forward, UP and Region 20 will continue to learn how this project can be improved in its next iteration. Some initial recommendations for GP and for any Dual Credit project in its beginning years are:

- Expand attention and understanding to system-level factors that affect Dual Credit participation, completion, and success. Dual credit is one part of the college readiness landscape and cannot be treated in a vacuum. All Dual Credit projects should give special attention to how Dual Credit interacts with other college readiness programs.
- Alignment of Dual Credit courses is vital, but is only as valuable as the reach of students Dual Credit is attracting. While the dual mission of alignment and accessibility is key, accessibility and awareness is a fundamental first step.
- ISD and IHE leadership and administration must be involved in ongoing discussions and meetings. Ensuring leaders are in the room is important, but requiring leaders who are decision makers to attend is critical.

