



Perfect Pairing

Dual-enrollment course sets up students for college and beyond

BY HARPER LEE

HAILEY BRUNSON NEVER thought a theatre course would lead her to the White House. "It was so surreal," the Rock Ridge High School senior says about meeting President Obama and the First Lady last year. "It was like a dream, being on the front lawn and shaking the president's hand." Brunson initially focused on sports growing up, but as a teenager she was diagnosed with a chronic illness that sidelined her athletic career. Wanting to stay involved at school led her to theatre and, ultimately, Anthony Cimino-Johnson's dual-enrollment theatre course.

The course, a partnership between Virginia's Rock Ridge High School and Richard Bland College, a two-year junior college associated with the College of William and Mary, allows high school students to enroll simultaneously in two different academic programs and educational institutions. If successful, they ob-

Members of Rock Ridge High School's dual-enrollment theatre course in Washington, D.C.

ROSEMARY GIBNEY/ALAMY

Bonus points

Dual-enrollment theatre courses are helpful to students wanting to take a step toward college and save money, but they've also been good for Rock Ridge's general theatre program. Not only does the class attract young theatre-lovers and further engage them in the material, but it also creates a capstone experience that underclassmen can work toward and look forward to.

Enrollment in Cimino-Johnson's regular theatre classes has skyrocketed. Beginning with just 75 students in his first year at Rock Ridge, he now juggles more than 200 students in his entire program. The dual-enrollment course "is an upper-level class, and having students who wouldn't typically take theatre one, two, three, four — they're going to take all the way to theatre four just so they can take dual enrollment and get those credits," Cimino-Johnson says.

For theatre programs and theatre educators, a college-level course illustrates the value of programs that could easily be misunderstood as silly or frivolous. "I think what this does is to legitimize theatre education in terms of the academic side, because even though there's no AP test at the end of this course, there still is a final exam," Cimino-Johnson says. "Students still have to meet these standards. And they still have to read. They still have to do script analysis. It also legitimizes theatre in the eyes of those people making policy about education. It says, 'Hey, wait a minute, the theatre arts has this class, which leads to free access to college education. It is a college-level class. And, therefore, we need to take this a lot more seriously.'"

tain credit for their work from both schools, offering the opportunity to acquire college credit for work completed while still in high school.

Although similar in rigor to International Baccalaureate or Advanced Placement courses, dual-enrollment classes don't rely on standardized, national tests and materials. Instead, they hinge on a partnership between specific institutions. The schools collaborate on the goals, syllabus, and curriculum, and students receive credit by receiving an A, B, or C.

Rock Ridge had already worked with the junior college on a series of other, more traditional dual-enrollment courses, but Kevin Terry, director of school counseling, wanted something that had wider appeal and worked for both college-bound students and those who were college-unsure. The College Board offers AP courses in music theory and art, but there is no AP equivalent in theatre.



Opera singer and Catholic University faculty member Sharon Christianman leads a workshop with dual-enrollment students.

And a college-level theatre class for high schoolers can be a tough sell. "People don't say, 'Take theatre and that'll help you get college credit,'" Terry explains. "They say, 'Take AP physics and that'll help you get college credit.' We've had to bend a lot of minds in getting that understanding."

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Breaking new ground, for schools and students

Located in Loudoun County, Rock Ridge High School is only three years old, serving about 1,700 students. The school's dual-enrollment theatre class is the first of its kind in Virginia and

one of very few dual-enrollment offerings in the arts, nationally.

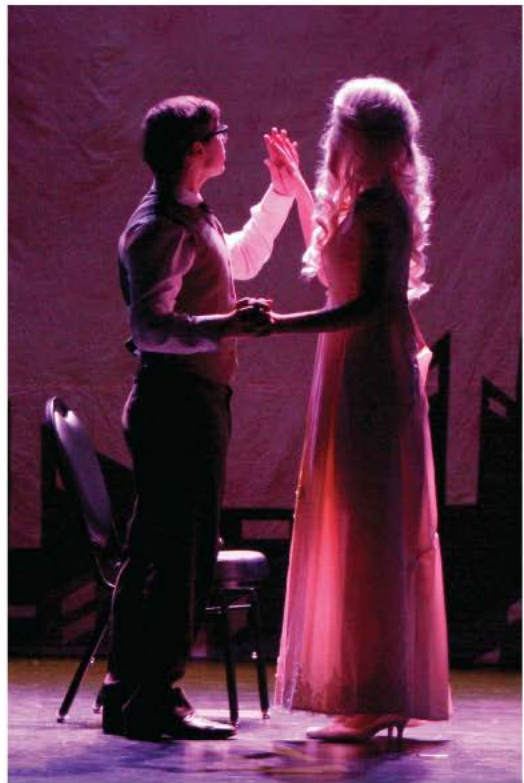
Principal John Duellman, a former English and drama teacher, didn't hesitate to support the dual-enrollment theatre idea. Although his school isn't even at capacity, Rock Ridge has two full-time theatre teachers, and a third of the student body is involved in the arts. "The kids are absolutely passionate," Duellman says. "I think the beauty of a dual-enrollment course is that it opens up opportunities for kids who maybe don't see college as their first option — or as an option at all. Students are seeing the things that they love and the things that they are passionate about that they can follow throughout their lives."

When considering dual-enrollment theatre, Duellman and Terry knew they already had the perfect resource in Cimino-Johnson, the school's Thespian troupe director who had an M.A. from New York University in drama therapy, qualifying him to teach at the college level. To get started, Cimino-Johnson worked with Richard Bland College faculty member Jill Mitten to establish learning goals and shape the course's curriculum. He ultimately created a triple-threat course in theatre history, literature, and performance, hoping that the class could count for credit in theatre, humanities, or English.

Mitten describes their course as a unique mix of theatre appreciation, theatre history, and dramatic literature.

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Students "are learning about all aspects of theatre, putting all the theory in place," she says. "But then at the high school level, you have things like drama clubs and acting classes,



Dual-enrollment students Seth Cooper and Jordan Green in a moment from their production of *Ernest and the Pale Moon*.

so they can take that information into those situations as well and really get hands-on engagement."

The current course is divided into two parts. The first covers classical theatre up through the mid-20th century. The second picks up where the first leaves off, bringing students all the way up to contemporary theatre. Each half is worth three college credits, and students can take both

sections or just the first. The course receives a great deal of reading and script analysis, which is evaluated through writing and discussion, as well as production, performance, application, and design.

Last year's class produced *Ernest and the Pale Moon*. This year's group is debating *The Very Grey Matter of Edward Blank*, a new play from Great Britain. "What I've noticed is that



Students from Rock Ridge's dual-enrollment class with students from Walkerville Collegiate Institute in Canada waiting to step into the Rose Garden at the White House.

High standards

Students have to meet specified learning outcomes when they enroll in a dual-enrollment course, as laid out by Richard Bland College. For example, they must identify terminology related to the art of theatre and analyze the role that theatre plays in society, both past and present, demonstrating a strong understanding of theatre as a fine art. The class must also align with the National Core Arts Standards for theatre education and prepare students to participate in the National Individual Events program at state and national Thespian events.

they're really making a lot of connections and correlations between theatre history and modern or contemporary performance," Cimino-Johnson says. "And they really love a class where they can dive deep into the literature and also into the performance end and really explore on a collegiate level."

In 2015, the course's inaugural year, 28 Rock Ridge students enrolled. The following year, 26 enrolled. The results are encouraging: 21 of 28 students received a superior rating for their work in Individual Events at Virginia's 2015 state Thespian festival, proving that students have learned how to translate what they've learned in class to the outside world.

A diversity of students with a diversity of skills

Because Richard Bland College grants associate's degrees designed to transfer to any four-year, post-secondary institution in Virginia, Rock Ridge students could potentially leave high school with a number of general

education credits already under their belt — at no cost. While developing the dual-enrollment program, Rock Ridge and Richard Bland prioritized making their offerings completely free to students. To do this, the college is using money received from the state to offset the cost of tuition. "The hope is to be able to offer this, as it grows, anywhere in the country," Cimino-Johnson says.

At the Educational Theatre Association's 2016 National Conference, Cimino-Johnson led workshops on how teachers can plant dual-enrollment courses in their schools. He cited a growing body of research on dual enrollment that shows how these courses increase the likelihood that low-income or first-generation college students will earn a college degree — critical at a time when most jobs and career paths require a B.A. "They're getting college credit and having experiences they wouldn't have otherwise had," Terry says. "That's something that's invaluable. And then the kids that

we're reaching ... it's our most diverse class of our AP and dual-enrollment classes."

Theatre is especially well-suited to preparing students for life after high school, in college, and beyond. "There are so many components of theatre education," Cimino-Johnson says, "from sitting around the design table [talking] about a production, to executing those designs, to having them fully realized, to managing budgets, and teaching them how to create résumés." He also enriched his dual-enrollment course with master classes in stage fighting, voice, and movement taught by college faculty in and around Virginia.

These classes go a long way to demystify college options, college work, and even the professional world. During her visit to Rock Ridge, opera singer and Catholic University of America faculty member Sharon Christmas talked with students about how many people it takes to make theatre work, including those whom students may not have considered, such as makeup artists and business managers. And that's the point of the dual-enrollment program: to open students' eyes to different possibilities.

Tomorrow, the world

Both Cimino-Johnson and Terry hope that dual-enrollment theatre catches on nationwide. "I would love to start a national conversation with theatre teachers and help provide that language and see what support we can start to gain from other states, because there's got to be other states on board that would love to offer this opportunity," Cimino-Johnson says. For him, it's great to give kids a break on college tuition, but the real value of strong theatre education is about transforming young lives, creating future leaders, parents, citizens, and professionals.

Senior Hailey Brunson would certainly agree. The former athlete now cultivates interests in costume design and acting, hoping to major in theatre after graduation. "It's an environment where I can do whatever I want and



Extra credit

Dual-enrollment students Nam Denenberg and Hailey Brunson holding certificates indicating they passed the NOCTI (National Occupational Competency Testing Institute) in Performing and Visual Arts. The NOCTI is a career and technical education (CTE) exam for secondary and post-secondary students. Denenberg and Brunson both earned CTE certification that they can include on résumés and college applications. NOCTI certifications can be taken in technical theatre as well. Cimino-Johnson thinks that the dual-enrollment course prepared his students to succeed in the exams. Last year, three dual-enrollment theatre students took the NOCTI. This year, his entire class is taking the exam.

be whatever I want and still be happy and healthy," she says. Before taking the dual-enrollment theatre class, Brunson had tackled a number of other dual-enrollment and AP classes. At first, she didn't see how a theatre class could fit

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into an academic model. Wouldn't it just revolve around performance? "It was kind of eye-opening to learn that you actually have to do script analysis and type papers and do research," she says. "But there's also been the performance aspect."

That performance aspect led to a collaboration of sorts last year with

Canadian high school Walkerville Collegiate Institute, which had heard about Rock Ridge's production of *Ernest and the Pale Moon*. Students from both schools conducted Skype discussions on the challenges of performing the play, how to stage certain scenes, and how they might work together in the future. Their partnership and the course's innovative theatre format caught the attention of the White House, and First Lady Michelle Obama invited the groups to participate in a special ceremony in the Rose Garden honoring educational partnerships between American and Canadian schools.

If theatre offers a well-rounded education, then the dual-enrollment model is classroom theatre education at its most rigorous — a valuable bridge to college for a wide variety of students. "I think it empowers our future," Cimino-Johnson says. "It empowers children that take our classes to be confident, to be who they are, to accept who they are, to accept the people around them. And to take risks in life, to have a vision." ▼