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An examination of the postgraduation benefits of earning a Seal of Biliteracy

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The Challenge

Critics argue that the Seal of Biliteracy (SoBL) falls short of the promises set forth in policy texts, but few studies have examined what recipients report as postgraduation benefits. Are recipients earning college credit or experiencing greater job marketability? Does earning a SoBL affirm linguistically-minoritized students' identities? This article presents findings from interviews with 33 individuals who earned a SoBL in Minnesota.

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Abstract

Across the United States, students have the opportunity to earn a Seal of Biliteracy (SoBL) when they graduate from high school. Awarded to students who demonstrate proficiency in two or more languages, the SoBL originated to confront English-only ideologies and promote multilingualism. But critics question the impact of the policy on students and whether English-dominant students experience greater impacts than their linguistically-minoritized peers. To that end, this study posed the question, What do recipients report postgraduation as benefits of earning a SoBL? In this qualitative investigation, 33 SoBL earners were interviewed postgraduation to analyze the benefits that they experienced from SoBL attainment. Four themes characterized the findings: increased employability in sales and education, pride and acknowledgment for linguistically-minoritized students, greater confidence

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and interest in postsecondary education, and difficulty receiving college credit. The article concludes with implications for strengthening the impact of the policy.

KEYWORDS
advocacy and policy, identity, implementation and assessment, program design

1 | INTRODUCTION

Many students in US schools who demonstrate proficiency in English and another language[1] now have the opportunity to earn a *Seal of Biliteracy* (SoBL) when they graduate from high school. All 50 states have SoBL policies in place. In a country with a history of subtractive educational policies that emphasize the learning of English at the expense of other languages (Menken, 2010; Menken & Kleyn, 2010; Valenzuela, 1999), the SoBL offers a counter narrative, highlighting the importance of learning languages other than English. With the well-documented benefits of bilingualism[2] (see Bialystok, 2011), there is hope that the SoBL will foster more opportunities for multilingual education (Davin et al., 2018; Heineke & Davin, 2021; Olsen, 2020). Language-minoritized students—speakers of nondominant languages (Flores et al., 2015)—report that the SoBL offers much-needed validation of their language and culture (Castro, 2014; Davin, 2021b; Davin & Heineke, 2018; Marichal et al., 2021; Monto, 2022). Studies also suggest that the potential of earning a SoBL at graduation motivates students to continue their study of other languages when they might not have otherwise (Davin & Heineke, 2018; Marichal et al., 2021; Monto, 2022). In one of the only quantitative investigations on the SoBL to date, Mihaly et al. (2022) found that students who earned a SoBL were more likely to enroll in college full time and were more likely to enroll in 4-year institutions than students who did not.

But critiques of the SoBL have grown in recent years and more research is needed to understand how earning a SoBL influences students after graduation. Discourses around the policy often draw upon global human capital discourses, emphasizing the labor market benefits of SoBL attainment (Subtirelu et al., 2019). Schwedhelm and King (2020) question whether these perceived benefits come to fruition, contending that the SoBL has a "lack of clear value in what has become an inflated marketplace of academic credentials" (p. 17). To date, no research has examined the extent to which the SoBL fulfills the promises embedded in SoBL policy discourses.

In light of the limited research, the present study responded to the following question: What do recipients report postgraduation as benefits of earning a SoBL? Although debates regarding the merits and dangers of the SoBL continue to play out in the scholarly community and on social media, students' voices are rarely included. Students must make sense of the SoBL through what they are told about it and their own experiences. They have "unique perspectives" and insights that "warrant not only the attention but also the responses of adults; and ... they should be afforded opportunities to actively shape their education" (Cook-Sather, 2006, pp. 359–360). Through interviews with both linguistically-minoritized and English-dominant students, we sought to understand perceptions of the postgraduation benefits of SoBL attainment, considering personal and social dimensions that quantitative analyses may not fully capture.

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2 | CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The SoBL originated in California, crafted by an organization of advocates called *Californians Together* to overturn Proposition 227, which had prohibited schools from offering bilingual education to English Learners (ELs; Olsen, 2020). Goals of the policy included encouraging the creation of bilingual programming, closing the achievement gap for students labeled as ELs, sending the message that students' home languages and cultures were valued, and providing evidence of skills to future employers and college admissions offices (Olsen, 2020; Thurmond, 2019). As news of the innovative policy spread, organizations and policymakers in other states initiated efforts to establish their own SoBL policies (see Davin et al., 2022). Some encountered minimal resistance, while others faced opposition and made repeated revisions to secure legislative approval (Heineke et al., 2018; Olsen, 2020).

Perhaps to appeal to lawmakers, policymakers in many states framed SoBL policy texts in neoliberal ideologies, like many education policies (see Gándara & Daenekindt, 2022; Giroux, 2002). Neoliberalism is broadly defined as "the extension of competitive markets into all areas of life" in an attempt to "instill a series of values and social practices in subjects" (Springer et al., 2016, p. 2). In their textual analysis of states' official policies, Chang-Bacon and Colomer (2022) found that most states' policies followed that of California by beginning with a brief preamble focused on the value of diversity, culture, and community, before shifting to a more extensive focus on economic activity. Subtirelu et al. (2019), drawing upon the work of Valdez et al. (2016), referred to the former as equity/heritage discourses and the latter as global human capital discourses. Equity/heritage discourses frame the SoBL as a way to address social inequities and preserve language and culture, identifying the struggles of language-minoritized students. In contrast, global human capital discourses frame the SoBL as a way to increase marketability and become more competitive in the global economy (Subtirelu et al., 2019).

The use of global human capital discourses in SoBL policies concerns many scholars because it frames language proficiency as a commodity (Kubota, 2011; Wee, 2003). Such commodification raises concerns that language-minoritized groups might be less likely to experience the same economic benefits as their majority-group peers (Schwedhelm & King, 2020; Subtirelu et al., 2019). The neoliberal discourse of human capital "does not guarantee employability for all" and "individual attributes such as age, personality, physical conditions, and gender matter" (Kubota, 2011, p. 257). For example, research focused on the Latinx population in the United States found that bilingualism may be more valued in certain occupations than others (Alarcón et al., 2014a), fluent bilinguals may earn lower wages than monolingual English speakers depending on profession (e.g., health and public safety; Alarcón et al., 2014b), and women are less employed and earn less than their male counterparts (Moore et al., 2014). Because the SoBL is a signal of bilingualism and biliteracy, it follows that these inequities may extend to SoBL recipients as well.

3 | LITERATURE REVIEW

Research to date on how earning a SoBL influences students is limited. In this section, we review existing studies, beginning with those where students reported perceived benefits that aligned to global human capital discourses followed by those that aligned to equity/heritage discourses. Then, we review literature focused on aspects of SoBL policies and implementation that can foster inequity, causing English-dominant students to reap more benefits than their linguistically-minoritized peers.

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Existing research shows that students are motivated to pursue a SoBL by factors that align to global human capital discourses like increased job marketability and college credit. Unlike the present study, in the existing research, participants were primarily still in high school, with the exception of a six-participant study by Colomer and Chang-Bacon (2020) and an innovative study of a program that awarded the SoBL at the postsecondary level rather than in high school (Monto, 2022). One common theme ran across all existing research. Students uniformly reported that they were motivated to pursue a SoBL by the hope that it would help them in their future careers (Castro, 2014; Colomer & Chang-Bacon, 2020; Davin, 2021a; Davin & Heineke, 2018; Monto, 2022). In the largest of these investigations, which included a survey of 192 students, 75% ($n = 77$) of English-dominant and 79% ($n = 115$) of linguistically minoritized students *strongly agreed* or *agreed* that they were motivated to pursue a SoBL by future employment opportunities (Davin & Heineke, 2018).

A second common theme across the literature was the desire to earn college credit in high school (Davin, 2021a; Davin & Heineke, 2018; Hancock & Davin, 2020). *Prior Learning Assessment* refers to the process of recognizing and awarding credit to students for learning that occurred outside of the college classroom (García & Leibrandt, 2020). Since World War II, many states have had legislation in place that requires institutions of higher education (IHEs) to award credit to students for military experience and Advanced Placement (AP) scores. Today, legislation in three states, Illinois, Minnesota, and Rhode Island, also includes credit for SoBL recipients. Many more IHEs award these credits voluntarily (e.g., the University of Maine, the University of Hawai'i; see Davin, 2021a). Across the studies reviewed, students, especially linguistically-minoritized students who might not have had the same access to credit-granting courses in high school (Kanno & Kangas, 2014), repeatedly expressed interest in pursuing a SoBL to make college more affordable (Davin, 2021b; Davin & Heineke, 2018; Hancock & Davin, 2020).

While both English-dominant and linguistically-minoritized students cited neoliberal goals for SoBL attainment, the latter also frequently reported benefits that aligned to equity/heritage discourses. Across studies, linguistically-minoritized students spoke about the SoBL as a way to acknowledge and preserve their language abilities, heritage, and culture (Castro, 2014; Davin, 2021b; Monto, 2022). When asked about the impact, the students in Castro (2014) reported that the SoBL encouraged them to embrace their heritage, maintain their home language, and recognize the sacrifices that their parents had made to become part of this country. Students in Davin (2021b) poignantly explained that the heavy reliance on English in US schools created tensions between them and their immigrant parents and that the SoBL helped to assuage that tension, sending the message that their home language "actually does matter" (p. 191). Students in Monto (2022), who earned the SoBL in college rather than high school, reported similar motivations, stating that they developed greater pride of their Latinx heritage after receiving recognition for their biliteracy.

3.1 | Inequities in implementation

The literature suggests that students are motivated by both global human capital discourses and equity/heritage discourses, but researchers have expressed concerns about whether all students have the same access to the benefits associated with earning a SoBL. Certain characteristics of policy implementation foster inherent inequity. One such characteristic relates to the evidence required to demonstrate world language proficiency. Some schools rely solely on the

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standardized assessments administered in AP programs to award the SoBL (Heineke & Davin, 2021; Marichal et al., 2021), which means that students not in AP courses do not have access. Not only are AP assessments only offered in seven languages (College Board, 2023), but Black and Latinx students are historically underrepresented and excluded from AP coursework (Kanno & Kangas, 2014; Rodriguez & McGuire, 2019; Wilson et al., 2015). Thus, the practice of using only AP assessments to award the SoBL bars some students from participation.

Additionally, in some states, research suggests that the SoBL privileges students from English-dominant homes who choose to learn an additional language in school (Subtirelu et al., 2019). This is largely because SoBL implementation is typically voluntarily and often unfunded (Davin & Heineke, 2022). Subtirelu et al. (2019) compared demographics of participating and nonparticipating public high schools in California for the 2015–2016 school year. They found that three factors predicted schools' participation in that state: total enrollment, the percentage of English-proficient students in the school, and the percentage of students who qualified for free meals. The first two increased and the third decreased the probability that a school implemented the SoBL. Stakeholders in California and others across the country have since worked to address these inequities with great success (Californians Together, 2019), but those initial findings set off alarms across the country that the SoBL was prioritizing the elite bilingualism of English-dominant students who learned an additional language in school rather than linguistically-minoritized students.

A third potential inequity with relevance to the present study relates to the awarding of college credit for SoBL attainment. Through interviews with faculty at three IHEs, Davin (2021a) found variations in how credits were offered. Some IHEs awarded credits through retroactive credit policies in which the language department placed students into an appropriately-leveled course based on their SoBL and then awarded credits for lower-level courses once the student passed. Other IHEs did not require language course enrollment, but instead awarded SoBL credits as generic transfer credits. Both approaches have the potential to foster inequity. The retroactive credit approach can exclude students who earned a SoBL in a language not offered at the IHE. The transfer credit approach can cause problems for students who require financial aid because such aid is typically available only for the number of credits required for a degree. Credits beyond that limit are at the students' expense. When universities do not have a language requirement for graduation, SoBL credits awarded as transfer credits rather than for required coursework can cause students to exhaust their financial aid before completing their major. For example, a student who earns 16 credits for a SoBL might reach the typical requirement of 120 credits before they have completed the required courses for their major. Beyond these issues, all institutions, to our knowledge, require students to formally request SoBL credits. Unlike AP scores which are sent to the university from the College Board (i.e., the organization that develops and administers AP exams), there is no centralized entity to send SoBL reports. No research has been published to date on whether students are actually requesting and receiving those credits. For many students, especially first-generation college goers, this extra step of formally requesting credits may present a barrier.

4 | METHODS

This qualitative study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) sought to understand how recipients interpreted and constructed the meaning of the SoBL in their social worlds, specifically focused on the recognition's benefits. The study was situated in the context of Minnesota and

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represented the second phase of a larger investigation (see Davin, 2021b). In the first phase, which occurred in the spring of 2019, we interviewed high school seniors to inquire about their goals in pursuing a SoBL. At that time, many of the students had taken a world language proficiency assessment or AP test to earn a SoBL, but had not yet received their results. The present study took place in April through October of 2020 and included both students whom we had interviewed in the spring of 2019 as well as others who had graduated in the previous three years. In this way, all participants had earned a SoBL between one and three years prior.

4.1 | Context

We choose Minnesota as the context for this investigation because stakeholders in that state have made concentrated efforts to implement the SoBL in equitable and accessible ways (Okraski et al., 2020). The state's legislation for the SoBL, called the *Bilingual* and *Multilingual Seals*, uses both global human capital and equity/heritage discourses, establishing the recognition to "strive for the world's best workforce" and "close the academic achievement and opportunity gap" (Minnesota Legislature, 2021). Minnesota's policy requires students to demonstrate world language proficiency on an approved assessment of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Rather than relying solely on commercially available assessments that may not exist in less commonly tested languages, educators in Minnesota have invested in creating assessments of the languages most commonly spoken by students in the state, for example, Hmong, Karen, Somali, and Tamil (Okraski et al., 2020). Finally, Minnesota is one of only three states in which official policy mandates that IHEs in the state system offer college credit to SoBL earners, regardless of language. Such an approach aims to increase equity by offering pathways to college credit for students who may not have had the opportunity to enroll in college credit-granting courses (e.g., AP, IB; Davin & Heineke, 2022).

4.2 | Participants

Participants in the present study were 33 students who had graduated from a high school in Minnesota and earned the SoBL, recruited via a combination of purposeful and snowball sampling. When we conducted focus groups with students across three school districts in a first phase of this research, we asked students to include an email address if they were willing to be contacted for a follow-up study once they had graduated. Thirty-six of the original 66 students provided their email address. When we reached back out to these 36 participants the following year for the second phase of the research (i.e., purposeful sampling), only two students initially responded. However, that number grew to eight when we offered gift cards for participation. A few invalid email addresses and the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic likely contributed to this low response rate. Therefore, at the end of each interview, we asked each participant if they knew of other SoBL earners who might agree to an interview (i.e., snowball sampling). In total, there were 33 participants, all of whom had earned a SoBL.

Table 1 displays participant demographics. Pseudonyms were assigned by choosing common names from the same heritage language of the participant. The sample included students who had earned a SoBL in Spanish ($n = 12$), Hmong ($n = 8$), Mandarin Chinese ($n = 4$), Arabic ($n = 3$), Tamil ($n = 3$), German ($n = 1$), Russian ($n = 1$), and Somali ($n = 1$). By including participants with diverse language and cultural backgrounds, we aimed to capture

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TABLE 1 List of study participants.

Pseudonym	Language of SoBL	Received college credit	AP or seal test	Immigrant status	Subgroup	Employment	IHE
Amanda	Spanish	Yes (AP credit)	AP	N/A	1	Marketing intern at vehicle manufacturer	Private university out of state
Anna	Spanish	No	AP	N/A	1	No current employment	Private university out of state
Ashley	Spanish	Yes (AP credit)	AP	N/A	1	Part-time employee in retail store	Private university in state
Daiyu	Chinese	No	AP	Second	1	No current employment	Public university out of state
Dan	Spanish	Yes (AP credit)	AP	N/A	1	Teaching assistant	Private university in state
Diya	Tamil	No	SoBL test	Second	1	Intern at the University of Minnesota	University of Minnesota
Fatima	German	No	AP	1.5	1	Tutor	Private university out of state
Jia	Chinese	No	AP	Second	1	No current employment	University of Minnesota
Lila	Spanish	Yes (AP credit)	AP	Second	1	Social media evaluator	Private university out of state
Ling	Chinese	Yes (AP credit)	AP	Second	1	No current employment	Public university out of state
Nina	Russian	No	SoBL test	N/A	1	No current employment	University of Minnesota
Peter	Spanish	Yes (AP credit)	AP	N/A	1	No current employment	Public university out of state
Pranav	Tamil	No	SoBL test	1.5	1	Employee at retail store	University of Minnesota
Sabrina	Chinese	No	AP	Second	1	No current employment	Private university out of state
Sara	Tamil	No	SoBL test	Second	1	No current employment	Public university out of state
Sofia	Spanish	Yes (AP credit)	AP	Second	1	Elementary Spanish teacher	University of Minnesota
Viviana	Spanish	No	AP	Second	1	No current employment	University of Minnesota

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TABLE 1 (Continued)

Pseudonym	Language of SoBL	Received college credit	AP or seal test	Immigrant status	Subgroup	Employment	IHE
Ahmed	Arabic	No	SoBL test	1.5	2	No current employment	Community/technical college out of state
Alang	Hmong	Not yet	SoBL test	1.5	2	No current employment	Private university in state
Eve	Hmong	No[a]	SoBL test	1.5	2	Daycare worker	Not in college
Fwam	Hmong	Yes	SoBL test	1.5	2	No current employment	Private university out of state
Houa	Hmong	Not yet	SoBL test	1.5	2	Part-time personal care assistant	University of Minnesota
Isabella	Spanish	Not yet	SoBL test	1.5	2	Employee at the Department of Motor Vehicles	Community/technical college in state
Jack	Spanish	No	SoBL test	N/A	2	No current employment	Private university out of state
Julian	Spanish	N/A	SoBL test	Second	2	No current employment	Community/technical college in state
Keej	Hmong	No[a]	SoBL test	1.5	2	No current employment	Public university in state
Maiv	Hmong	No[a]	SoBL test	Second	2	No current employment	Private university out of state
Maria	Spanish	No	SoBL test	1.5	2	Employee at fast food restaurant	Private university in state
Mos	Hmong	No	SoBL test	1.5	2	Part-time Elementary school employee	University of Minnesota
Omar	Arabic	No[a]	SoBL test	1.5	2	Account manager at home improvement store	Community/technical college in state
Tooj	Hmong	Yes	SoBL test	1.5	2	Coach	Community/technical college in state

(Continues)

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TABLE 1 (Continued)

Pseudonym	Language of SoBL	Received college credit	AP or seal test	Immigrant status	Subgroup	Employment	IHE
Yasir	Somali	No[a]	SoBL test	1.5	2	No current employment	Community/technical college in state
Zara	Arabic	No	SoBL test	1.5	2	Employee at healthcare company	Public university out of state

Abbreviations: AP, advanced placement; SoBL, Seal of Biliteracy.

[a]Indicates that the postsecondary institution awards college credit but the student has not received it.

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TABLE 2 Demographics of schools in each subgroup.

	Percentage of students on Free and reduced-price lunch program (%)	Minority enrollment (%)	Percentage of students that passed at least one AP exam (%)
Subgroup 1			
Suburban district ($n = 17$)	8	35	55
Subgroup 2			
Urban district 1 ($n = 10$)	87	95	2
Urban district 2 ($n = 6$)	70	70	20

Note: Data from US News & Reports.

Abbreviation: AP, advanced placement.

the nuanced and varied ways in which the SoBL concept was understood and utilized within different communities.

Because Phase I of the present investigation took place at one small suburban school district and two large urban school districts, two subgroups organically emerged in our data set. Although we analyzed data based on individual learner attribute rather than subgroup, informed by the work of Subtirelu et al. (2019) and Davin (2021b), we grouped the students in Table 1 by subgroup to highlight the differences in the student populations from each context. Table 2 shows the characteristics of each district.

Seventeen of the 33 participants attended a suburban school district where the first phase of this investigation occurred. The school was classified as a top-10 high school in Minnesota based on student performance. Of the 17 students in Subgroup 1, two (12%) were 1.5-generation immigrants, meaning that they had migrated during their K-12 schooling. Of the two 1.5-generation immigrants, one regularly moved between the United States and India for his father's profession and the other had attended an English-medium international school in the Middle East before migration. Nine of the 17 (53%) were second-generation immigrants. Six of the 17 (35%) did not consider themselves immigrants because neither they nor their parents had migrated. In this article, we label them nonimmigrants. Thirteen of the 17 (76%) in Subgroup 1 earned the SoBL by passing an AP language test at the end of AP coursework and four (24%) earned the SoBL via another SoBL test.

Sixteen of the 33 participants attended urban school districts where the first phase of this research occurred. Of these 16 students, 13 (81%) were 1.5-generation immigrants, two (13%) were second-generation immigrants, and one was a nonimmigrant. None of these students earned the SoBL via an AP exam but instead all had taken another SoBL test.

4.3 | Data collection

Following Institutional Review Board approval, data in the present study were collected via semi-structured interviews. We emailed each participant that expressed interest in participation, and they responded with a convenient date and time. Upon receipt of written consent, interviews took place via telephone or videoconference, depending on the participant's

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preference, and lasted approximately a half hour. We began by asking students demographic questions about where they had attended high school, what languages they spoke and where they had learned those languages, and what they were presently doing. We then asked open-ended questions about their perceived benefits of earning a SoBL. These included questions like, "How did earning a SoBL influence you?" and "How did it make you feel to earn a SoBL?," followed by specific probes, such as whether they had earned college credit for their SoBL, whether it had helped them to find employment, and whether they thought pursuit of the recognition had been worth their time.

4.4 | Data analysis

After transcribing all interviews and uploading them to NVivo, the first author began with a first round of attribute coding (Saldaña, 2015), creating case classifications for each student. She designed the attribute coding schemes according to factors that, based on existing research, might have influenced how earning a SoBL benefitted participants. Those attribute codes were immigration status, language of SoBL, whether the student earned college credit for the SoBL, whether the student earned the SoBL by taking the AP exam or another SoBL assessment, and the type of high school that the student attended (i.e., urban public, suburban public, private).

The second round of coding included both inductive codes that emerged from the data and deductive codes (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) informed by existing literature on what benefits students expect in pursuit of a SoBL (Davin, 2021b; Davin & Heineke, 2018; Hancock & Davin, 2020). Deductive codes included *employment*, *college credit*, and *proof of language abilities*. The first author then read through the entirety of the data set, assigning deductive codes created a priori and inductive codes developed a posteriori. Examples of inductive codes that emerged included *increased self-confidence* and *pride*. Once all interviews were coded, we used NVivo to run a series of queries to examine how various attributes (i.e., immigration status, home language, high school attended) related to the various codes. Queries that yielded patterns of similarities or differences across attribute codes are presented in the findings.

5 | FINDINGS

Ninety-seven percent (32 out of 33) of participants responded that earning a SoBL was worth their time and efforts. Findings clustered around the themes of *Increased Employability in Sales and Education*, *Pride and Acknowledgment for Linguistically-Minoritized Students*, *Greater Confidence and Interest in Postsecondary Education*, and *A Struggle to Receive College Credit*.

5.1 | Increased employability in sales and education

Across our sample, students overwhelmingly reported that they expected the SoBL to bolster their employment opportunities, and some had concrete examples of how it already had. Approximately half of the participants were employed, including nine of the 17 (53%) students who had attended the suburban district and eight of the 16 students (50%) who had attended the urban districts. Twenty-six of the 33 (79%) participants spoke about the usefulness of the SoBL for employment, although this was slightly higher for nonimmigrants (83%) than

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1.5-generation immigrants (61%) or second-generation immigrants (67%). Of those 26 participants, many were full-time students and were not working, but 13 (40%) reported that having a SoBL had helped them find employment. The jobs that they described clustered around the educational and retail sectors—those that required interfacing with diverse clients. Examples included Mimi, who spoke Chinese and worked as a camp counselor, Sanjana, who spoke Tamil and worked at a drugstore, and Ayoub, who spoke Arabic and was a manager at a home improvement store. Sofia, who spoke Spanish, had graduated and was a teacher. She said, "[The SoBL is] on my resume and I think it definitely helped with showing my fluency and my adequateness to teach in the district that I'm teaching." Another student, Zara, who spoke Somali and Arabic, told a story about interviewing for her current part-time position as a translator in a call center. She explained that during the interview she felt it was not going well, so she mentioned that she had earned a SoBL. She said that the interviewer responded with, "Send me a picture of it, and then you've got the job." The interviewer called and offered her the position.

These accounts emphasized how students felt the SoBL enhanced their employability, aligning to neoliberal discourses that emphasize marketability and economic competitiveness (Kubota, 2011; Wee, 2003). Informed by the literature (Kubota, 2011), we ran an additional query to understand whether response patterns related to employment varied by whether the student had earned a SoBL in a language considered in-demand in the US labor market (New American Economy, 2017). Findings showed a slight difference, with 74% (14 of 19) of students who earned a SoBL in Spanish, Chinese, or Arabic reporting employment as a benefit compared to 57% (eight of 14) of students who earned the SoBL in another language.

5.2 | Pride and acknowledgment for linguistically-minoritized students

Across the linguistically-minoritized students, and especially salient from interviews with 1.5-generation immigrants, were the themes of pride and acknowledgment. Fwam, who spoke Hmong, described how the SoBL made her feel an "appreciation toward myself." She explained that "[the SoBL] really helps motivate me going on with my life knowing that I am fluent in my own language and I know how to read, write, and spell. Many of the newer generations, they don't know anything about our language and culture." She explained that earning the SoBL made her feel proud and made her want to teach others. Ahmed, who spoke Arabic, had a similar feeling of accomplishment. He said that earning a SoBL made him feel like he "actually [had] a thing that some people don't have," stating, "I have a language that I can speak and it just feels I'm kind of unique." These individuals were biliterate regardless of whether they earned a SoBL, but having an official credential to signify that biliteracy was proof that they felt was necessary to set them apart from others.

For many of these linguistically-minoritized students, a benefit went beyond pride to a deeply needed acknowledgment of their language and, perhaps to some extent, their identity. In describing her feelings, Zara, who spoke Arabic and Somali, explained:

> Let me find the right word for it. It's like, acknowledged. When you have something, and first of all, no one saw it, but then finally people get to see it, and you're like, great. I had the skills this whole time, but finally you're seeing it.

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She explained that taking a test in her home language and earning a "physical, touchable reward" for her proficiency made her feel seen for the first time. Omar, who spoke Arabic, echoed this sentiment. He said that earning a SoBL made him feel like his home language was important, stating "When I came to America, I didn't know my language mattered that much." The opportunity to take a test and earn a recognition for their home language was impactful for these students and represented the first time their language had been recognized and valued by the US schooling system. Yassir summed up the SoBL by saying it was a "great opportunity" because "Somali is my native language, and since I've been here, I never wrote Somali or tested my Somali."

These narratives aligned with equity/heritage discourses, emphasizing the SoBL's role in validating marginalized languages and identities (Cook-Sather, 2006; Kubota, 2011). Feelings of pride and acknowledgment were prevalent across the linguistically-minoritized students, especially those whose families spoke less commonly taught languages (e.g., Hmong, Somali). Although these outcomes aligned to equity/heritage discourses, respondents for this theme heavily overlapped with those for the previous theme—increased employability in sales and education. In sum, many of these students were motivated by both global human capital and equity/heritage discourses.

5.3 | Greater confidence and interest in postsecondary education

Four of the 15 (27%) 1.5-generation immigrants, two of the 11 (18%) second-generation immigrants, and two of the seven (29%) nonimmigrants reported that earning a SoBL increased their self-confidence. In some cases, this increased self-confidence spurred our participants to pursue opportunities they might not have otherwise pursued. Diya, who spoke Tamil, explained that earning a SoBL made her "more confident about applying to higher skill colleges." Before earning a SoBL, she said that she "didn't know if [she] was unique enough for those colleges to accept [her]." She explained, "It gives you the confidence that you actually learned this language properly and you're fluent to speak in it" and it "gives [you] the confidence that [you] can actually try for higher things." Fatima, who spoke German, suggested an explanation for this theme, stating, "In school, we always get kind of graded on something to know that we did well, and even though that's not necessarily true, that's one of the only ways we can know that we are doing well in certain things." The current era of testing and accountability in US schools perhaps spurred these participants' need for external validation of their language proficiency.

For some participants, primarily those whose families had immigrated more recently, their increased confidence led to an increased interest in pursuing postsecondary education, demonstrating how global human capital and equity/heritage discourses can overlap. Eight of the 15 (53%) 1.5-generation immigrants and two of the 11 (18%) second-generation immigrants reported that an impact of earning a SoBL was a greater interest in pursuing postsecondary education, while no nonimmigrants reported this. For some of our participants, passing the SoBL test and earning a SoBL made college seem more attainable. Omar, who earned a SoBL in Arabic and was enrolled at a local technical college, told us that earning a SoBL gave him a taste of what it felt like to earn a recognition. He said, "I wasn't planning to go to college, but when I got the award, I was like, 'Yeah, let me get the college degree too.'" We asked him what about earning the SoBL increased his college interest, and he replied, "It almost feels like, when [they] recognized us and gave us the award, it was like, 'Yeah, it feels great to be awarded with

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something you worked for. Let me get some more.'" Maria, who earned a SoBL in Spanish and was enrolled at a private liberal arts college, said that earning a SoBL made her realize that perhaps she could afford to pursue postsecondary education. She explained, "I was thinking that maybe I couldn't have been able to go to college because of not having enough money and everything." Even though her college did not give her credit for the SoBL, she said it was still "more of a motivation for [her] to go to college and actually finish it." Another participant, Ling, who earned a SoBL in Chinese and was studying at an out-of-state public university, explained that, before earning a SoBL, she had not thought much about going to college. She explained, "Everyone says college is hard, so I felt like if I could just pass this, then maybe I could do college too, since I wasn't super interested in like college at first." For some students in our sample, a college degree had not seemed attainable before they experienced the success of passing a SoBL assessment.

5.4 | A struggle to receive college credit

Only two of 33 (6%) participants in our sample reported receiving college credit for their SoBL. Of the students who attended high school in the suburban school district, all (100%) had enrolled in a 4-year college or university. Of the 16 who attended high school in the urban school districts, nine (56%) had enrolled in a 4-year college or university, six (38%) had enrolled in a 2-year community or technical college, and one had enrolled in a 4-year college but had withdrawn in the first semester. The two participants who earned credit through the SoBL—Tooj and Fwam—had earned the SoBL by voluntarily signing up and passing a SoBL assessment in Hmong, not through an AP course. Tooj enrolled at a community college in the Minnesota State system that was required by law to give credit to SoBL earners who requested it and Fwam enrolled at a private liberal arts college that voluntarily did so. These students formally requested the credits through the registrars. There were five additional participants (15%) enrolled at institutions that offered credit for SoBL attainment, but they had not received those credits because they did not know how to navigate the process. All five of these participants had also earned the SoBL by passing a SoBL assessment (i.e., not an AP test), four were 1.5-generation immigrants, and one was a second-generation immigrant. These participants either did not realize that they had to formally request the credits or were unsure about how to do so. For example, Keej, who earned a SoBL in Hmong, explained, "When I looked into my student account here, I didn't see ... the credits of the Bilingual Seal Test. So I was confused. I was like, 'Did I just take that test for nothing?' Because even though I got the certificate, I didn't get the credit that my teacher told me about." Eve, another student who earned a SoBL in Hmong and had originally enrolled at a state college before dropping out during the pandemic, reported that she did not receive credits because she had not enrolled in a language course. Similarly, when we asked Anna, who earned a SoBL in Spanish, about whether she had earned credit, she said, "I don't think so. I'm not sure I told them about it, actually. I don't know if I knew I could get credit for it."

There were seven participants (21%) in our sample that did receive college credit, but because of AP Language test scores, not because they had earned a SoBL. These seven participants all attended the same suburban high school where they took either an AP Spanish course or an AP Mandarin course. Four of the seven were second-generation immigrants who earned a SoBL in their heritage language. The other three came from monolingual homes and had learned Spanish in school. For example, Peter, who attended a public out-of-state university, explained that he studied Spanish

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from sixth through twelfth grade. He said that he, "didn't expect to get that many college credits for completing the AP class" but that he was happy he had because it gave him "eight humanities credits, which is about half of a semester load." In sum, students were more likely to receive college credit for AP scores than they were for earning a SoBL.

6 | DISCUSSION

This investigation analyzed the benefits of earning a SoBL reported by high school graduates. With written policy goals that included global human capital discourses, for example, establishing the "world's best workforce" and equity/heritage discourses, for example, closing the "academic achievement and opportunity gap" (Minnesota Legislature, 2021), we interviewed SoBL earners to understand how they felt earning the recognition had influenced their lives. We found that participants experienced benefits aligned to both types of discourses. The SoBL had positively impacted employment, made linguistically-minoritized students feel proud and acknowledged, and increased participants' self-confidence. A surprising and important finding was that earning a SoBL prompted some students to enroll in postsecondary education when they might not have otherwise.

Students' reported benefits of the SoBL aligned to many of those set forth by global human capital discourses. Validating their original motivations for pursuing the recognition (Castro, 2014; Colomer & Chang-Bacon, 2020; Davin & Heineke, 2018; Hancock & Davin, 2020; Monto, 2022), participants reported that the SoBL had helped them to secure employment. This finding was only slightly more prevalent for participants who earned a SoBL in a language considered in-demand in the US labor market (New American Economy, 2017), although many students were still living in urban, diverse, cities in Minnesota. In existing research, it is often unclear whether students felt that biliteracy itself or the SoBL specifically might help them to secure employment (Davin & Heineke, 2018). However, in the present study, students spoke specifically about the importance of the credential as proof, with one student explaining that she submitted a picture of her SoBL after a job interview. We interpret this finding with caution because most participants were pursuing higher education and primarily held part-time jobs in fields like retail or education; however, it suggests that the benefits of the SoBL likely extend to employment. With this small sample in this particular context, it was not possible to determine whether the recognition had any influence on wage or whether these benefits varied by region, gender, or additional language (see Alarcón et al., 2014b; Kubota, 2011), although the link between the SoBL and employment is a prime area for future research.

We interpret findings related to the second stated goal of the policy, closing the academic achievement and opportunity gap, with cautious optimism. Thirty-two of the 33 participants (97%) in this sample enrolled in postsecondary education. All participants from the suburban public district enrolled in 4-year institutions while six of the 16 students (38%) from the urban public districts instead enrolled in a 2-year technical or community college. Participants reported that the success of passing the SoBL assessment made them feel more academically competent and more motivated to pursue postsecondary education. Recognizing that students labeled as ELs are less likely than their peers to enroll in postsecondary education (Kanno & Kangas, 2014), this finding suggested that earning a SoBL might help to narrow the opportunity gap. Unlike Mihaly et al. (2022) who also found that SoBL attainment positively corresponded to full-time college enrollment, this qualitative study did not include a comparison group; however, this finding points to a need for future research related to a possible link between SoBL attainment and college enrollment.

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Although postsecondary enrollment was so high among participants, most did not receive the college credit that motivates so many students to pursue a SoBL (Davin, 2021b; Davin & Heineke, 2018; Hancock & Davin, 2020). Few participants attended participating IHEs and, of those that did, few understood how to request credit for their SoBL. These students were primarily 1.5-generation immigrants from homes where English was not the dominant language and may not have had the cultural capital necessary to navigate the complicated process of requesting college credit (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Farmer-Hinton, 2008). Lending support to existing concerns that the promises of the SoBL may be less likely realized by language-minoritized groups (Schwedhelm & King, 2020; Subtirelu et al., 2019), study participants who had attended the wealthier suburban school district and studied a world language via AP coursework were more likely to be awarded college credit for their biliteracy. Approximately 75% of IHEs in the United States award credit for AP scores (Rodriguez & McGuire, 2019), whereas only a minute fraction currently award credit for SoBL attainment.

Despite this shortcoming, for all linguistically-minoritized students in the present study, earning a SoBL fulfilled the promises set forth by equity/heritage discourses. Supporting the findings of Castro (2014) and Monto (2022), linguistically-minoritized students reported that earning a SoBL made them feel proud and acknowledged and increased their self-confidence. Many had spent years learning English in subtractive contexts where their home languages were ignored (see Davin, 2021b) and the SoBL validated their identities as speakers of languages other than English. The feelings of accomplishment and success that came from earning the SoBL bolstered students' confidence and, in some cases, motivated them to pursue postsecondary education when they might not have otherwise. For the linguistically-minoritized students in this study, the SoBL was more than just a new credential in "an already-crowded and inflated marketplace" (Schwedhelm & King, 2020, p. 22).

6.1 | Implications

Rather than halting this important movement for fear of creating greater inequity, we must continue to work toward implementing the SoBL with greater fidelity to its creators' original goals (see Olsen, 2020). Unlike a recognition of athletic talents, attendance, or mathematical skills, the SoBL represents a powerful affirmation of students' heritage and their linguistic and cultural roots. Research has shown that erasing a person's language can have severe and long-lasting effects (Fishman, 1991), which is why the SoBL is such a crucial tool in the fight against language loss and cultural erasure. By elevating the status of heritage languages and encouraging language instruction in US schools and communities, we can create a more inclusive and equitable society that honors and celebrates the linguistic and cultural diversity of all its members. We conclude with some implications to deepen and extend the strength of the SoBL.

To truly make a meaningful impact, we must get data related to the benefits of the SoBL into the hands of those who have the power to facilitate greater financial and social support, through outlets such as websites, policy briefs, or social media. As of January 2024, SoBL policies exist in all 50 states, yet the policy is still not widely known or understood across the country. The time is ripe for action. The SoBL connects to one of the four pillars of the US Secretary of Education's *Raise the Bar: Lead the World* initiative. To "increase pathways for a bilingual and multilingual workforce," Secretary Cardona's agenda includes leveraging the SoBL to provide greater multilingual educational opportunities (US Department of Education, 2023, p. 27). The plan further calls for expanding credit policies so that "every young person can earn college credit in

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high school and get a head start in earning a postsecondary credential" (p. 23). Federal funding for SoBL assessments and language instruction in schools would not only support these goals but would make a critical difference in addressing equity issues that arise in implementation.

We must also increase the signaling value of the SoBL by developing a standardized certificate or seal used across states that lists an individual's proficiency level and explains what an individual can do with the language at that level. This type of certificate could be attached to job resumes or posted on job search websites (e.g., LinkedIn). The SoBL offers a workplace credential not previously available and participants in the present study responded positively about its value in seeking employment. But too few employers are aware of the policy, much less the level of proficiency that it represents. Like a high school diploma, the SoBL represents that one has achieved a minimum level of performance. Without an accompanying transcript or certificate that notes the level of language proficiency and includes an explanation, it may signal little else. Moreover, similar to the work being done in Missouri in which local businesses post public endorsements of the SoBL (see Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2023), advocacy efforts should focus on promoting the policy to large employers in one's community to seek endorsements and increase awareness.

Finally, to address opportunity gaps, stakeholders need to grapple with the complexities of awarding college credit for the SoBL. IHEs that offer credit to students who passed AP exams need to institute similar policies to automatically award credit to students who earned a SoBL. The addition of a question regarding SoBL attainment to the Common App, a college application used by more than 900 IHEs, would help to publicize the SoBL program and streamline credit processes (see commonapp.org). High schools might also provide students with a directory of credit-granting institutions and invite former students to return and discuss the process. Such credit should be available to all students that enter with a SoBL, regardless of the language in which the SoBL was earned. Moreover, these credits need to count toward students' majors or completion requirements, rather than as generic transfer credits that can hinder their financial aid eligibility. Counselors, advisors, and admission specialists must educate students about how to request credits for the SoBL and how such requests might impact their financial aid. Until such changes occur, administrators, counselors, and teachers should be cautious about advertising the SoBL as a way to earn college credit.

Limitations of the present study included the small sample and the voluntary nature of participation. Regardless, findings can inform future research. Researchers might expand data collection to more contexts, examining more carefully the economic and social benefits of biliteracy and how those benefits vary by variables such as race, region, and language background. Data on college persistence rates and which students in which regions at which IHEs are earning college credit for SoBL attainment would also provide a clearer picture of the benefits of the SoBL. Researchers might also examine the extent to which SoBL attainment influences constructs like students' self-confidence, identity, and postsecondary plans.

7 | CONCLUSION

In the current landscape of increasing language program closures across the country (see Hartocollis, 2023), data from the present study underscore the importance of promoting students' multilingualism. Not only does proficiency in multiple languages support college and career readiness, it affirms multilingual identities and boosts students' confidence, which can have lifelong impacts on academic achievement, ethnic identity, and familial relationships

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(Oh & Fuligni, 2010). As we strive to adapt our educational systems, it is crucial to nurture, build upon, and celebrate the linguistic diversity that students bring to the classroom, ensuring a more inclusive and equitable learning experience for all.

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ENDNOTES

[1] In Hawai'i, students do not have to demonstrate proficiency in English but can instead demonstrate proficiency in Hawaiian and an additional language (Hawai'i State Department of Education, 2023).

[2] In this paper, the terms *bilingualism* and *multilingualism* are occasionally used interchangeably. However, it is important to clarify that they represent distinct but related linguistic competencies. Bilingualism typically refers to proficiency in two languages, while multilingualism refers to proficiency in more than two languages. Valdés (2020) contends that the name of the Seal of Biliteracy should be changed to the *Seal of Biliteracy and Linguistic Multicompetence*, eventually eliminating the term biliteracy.

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