



# Early college can boost college success rates for low-income, first-generation students

Giving students a taste of college early can encourage them to persist in high school and through higher education.

By Mamadou Ndiaye and Rebecca E. Wolfe

Science teacher Cierra Swopes has a unique perspective on taking college courses while still in high school. In 2008, she was in the second graduating class of Dayton Early College Academy (DECA). Six years later, Swopes got the job of her dreams: teaching chemistry at this nontraditional charter high school in Dayton, Ohio.

“As an early college student, I was privileged enough to graduate from high school with an associate degree,” said Swopes, who started taking college courses at Sinclair Community College during her freshman year at DECA, when she was only 13 years old. That experience was a bit intimidating at first, said Swopes, but she quickly adjusted with support from her DECA teachers, particularly her chemistry teacher.

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After graduating from DECA, Swopes went to Miami University, where she earned a bachelor's degree in chemistry and earth science education. Today she works alongside the very DECA teacher, now a curriculum specialist for chemistry, who gave her so much encouragement in her student days.

Swopes' story shows what is possible through early college designs — high schools and colleges joining forces to work together to create a path to college access and completion for millions of low-income and first-generation students. Designed initially as a small schools strategy, early college designs are now

being tested as whole-school and whole-district reform strategies and have been successfully adapted for dropout recovery programming as well. They have become a path to four-year degrees as well as to short-term credentials with immediate value in the labor market — and thus have the potential to be a game changer in our national effort to increase college access and completion for all.

## What is an early college design?

At its core, an early college design combines high school and college in rigorous yet supportive environments that embrace acceleration over remediation to increase college enrollment and persistence rates of students underrepresented in higher education and high-paying careers. A college-for-all culture helps motivate all students to earn an associate degree or significant college credit by high school graduation — at no cost to their families. Each school is a partnership between a school district and a nearby postsecondary institution, either a community college, a technical college, a four-year college, or a university. By locating in or near a college campus, early colleges first introduce, gradually expose, and then immerse students in the college experience.

Educators who design and operate early colleges often say that the most important feature is a sincere belief by adults that every student can learn and achieve college readiness. All students in an early college, regardless of past achievement, are on a college-prep track. Students who would be the first in their families to seek postsecondary education learn the background knowledge, problem-solving strategies, and other college-going skills that young people from more affluent families may learn from their parents or other adults. College identity and skills are fostered by strong connections to one or more postsecondary institutions, a mixed secondary and postsecondary curriculum, student-centered instruction, strong interpersonal relationships, and intensive academic supports.

**Research reinforcement:** *The combination of a positive peer culture and supportive adults focused on learning enhances students' abilities to learn and stay engaged and mitigates the negative effects and stress of poverty (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012; Hinton, Fischer, & Glennon, 2012; Yonezawa, McClure, & Jones, 2012).*

## Scaling excellence

Since its conception, the early college model has expanded from three schools in 2002 to nearly 280 in 2014, serving more than 80,000 students. Public school districts provide the ongoing operating budgets for each early college as they do for traditional

high schools. The innovation has been fueled in part by foundation support, starting in 2001 when the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation committed funding to plan and implement early college as a large-scale national reform initiative. Within the first five years, more than \$130 million in private startup funds have helped the movement grow, including major investments from the Walton Family Foundation, Lumina Foundation, Dell Foundation, Carnegie Corporation of New York, Ford Foundation, and W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

Thus far, results are promising: These young people graduate from high school, enroll in college, and persist in the first year at two to three times the rate of their peers.

The success and spread of early college designs are largely due to impressive outcomes with low-income and other underrepresented youth. For example, some 90% of early college students graduate from high school — 12 percentage points higher than the national average. Most early college students earn college credit in high school, and 30% earn an associate degree or other postsecondary credential with their diploma (Webb, 2013).

### Pharr-San Juan-Alamo, Texas: Districtwide strategy

Arguably one of the most far-reaching adaptations of the early college design is in the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo (PSJA) Independent School District. Located in the Rio Grande Valley, about 10 miles from the U.S.-Mexico border, PSJA serves 32,000 students in one of the nation's most impoverished areas. For seven years, under the leadership of Superintendent Daniel King, PSJA has worked with South Texas College and other partners to redefine the boundaries between secondary and postsecondary education and to assume joint responsibility for the postsecondary success of the region's youth.

PSJA leaders have the same goal for all their students: to succeed in postsecondary education and careers. But they recognize that different young people may take different paths to achieve success. As PSJA has expanded early college to thousands of students, the district has provided multiple options to meet their needs and interests. PSJA leaders have embraced the reality that college-for-all does not mean a four-year degree for all. Their vision is to create multiple paths that will enable students to realize their aspirations from graduating high school with several college credits and pursuing majors in

liberal arts, sciences, and engineering to earning industry-recognized technical certificates that can help them get jobs to work their way through college and advance their careers.

PSJA's eight high schools offer four distinct designs that integrate secondary school and college:

- 1. Stand-alone early college high schools.** Three schools offer students the support and sequence of courses needed to earn up to 60 college credits or an associate degree along with their diploma. One serves teen parents; another is a STEM-focused school serving just over 500 students; the third is an 1,800-student comprehensive high school that has been converted into a schoolwide early college school.
- 2. Back on track to college.** Two schools serve students who have been identified as off-track for high school graduation or who at some point left school altogether. One focuses on 18- to 26-year-olds; the other on 15- to 21-year-olds. Both have adapted the early college design to motivate students to get back on track not just to high school graduation but to enter and succeed in college. The courses start with college-success courses and move them as quickly as possible to college-level coursework.
- 3. Dual-to-degree pathways.** At three comprehensive high schools, the district is redesigning grades 11 and 12 to provide dual-enrollment opportunities for students who are connected to a program of study leading to a postsecondary certificate or college degree. Teachers of earlier grade levels are trained in instructional strategies that can prepare more students to succeed in college courses, with the aim of graduating with at least 12 transferable college credits.
- 4. School-within-a-school early college high schools.** The same three comprehensive high schools with dual-to-degree pathways also have small early college learning communities that put students on pathways to earn up to 60 college credits or an associate degree. The collocation of these small learning communities with the dual-to-degree pathways has been intentionally structured to foster the cross-fertilization of learning and practices for staff between the two about early college expectations and instructional strategies. Eventually, all of these school-within-a-school designs will become schoolwide, stand-alone early college high schools.

To make these outcomes possible, PSJA's high schools all incorporate meaningful, tuition-free college courses into the regular program of study

that will count toward a postsecondary degree or credential. Each school shares responsibility for student success with postsecondary partners, and each supports students as they transition from PSJA into college. But teachers do not wait until students reach high school to begin preparing them for college. All eight PSJA middle schools are focused on improving classroom instruction, providing explicit guidance about the academic and behavioral expectations of early college high schools, and building a school culture that promotes a college-going identity and career awareness.

**Research reinforcement:** *Achieving the potential of early college effects at scale, while maintaining the student-centered focus necessary for solid learning, demands systemic supports and a coherent focus, especially at the district level (Honig & Rainey, 2015; Datnow, Levin, & Carrier, 2012; Lampert, 2015).*

PSJA's strategy has started to pay off as more students are starting and completing college courses, some earning certificates and degrees by high school graduation. In the 2010-11 school year, 1,700 PSJA high school students (about 22%) took college courses from South Texas College and other college partners. By 2013-14, that number had risen to 2,800 and 33%. In 2013, 103 graduating seniors — about 5% — received an associate degree or college-level certification. By 2014, just one year later, 370 graduating seniors (about 21%) had earned the same (Vargas, 2014).

By locating in or near a college campus, early colleges first introduce, gradually expose, and then immerse students in the college experience.

**Research reinforcement:** *The past five years of education research have exploded the myth of the average learner. Programs of study that customize pathways and provide options to the individual learner have a better chance of producing positive results (Hinton, Fischer, & Glennon, 2012).*

**Research reinforcement:** *There is increasing agreement around the kinds of college- and career-ready skills students need and how they learn them. The early college design of real-world connections and various academic supports, mixed with the ability for students to understand their own education trajectory, is a strong combination for success (Hoffman, 2015; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012).*

Across the country, a significant expansion effort of early college designs is underway — with PSJA

Independent School District, the Denver Public Schools, Educate Texas, Brownsville Independent School District, and Jobs for the Future (JFF) as a national intermediary—with a \$15 million Investing In Innovation (I3) grant from the U.S. Department of Education. I3 represents another critical opportunity to further test the effectiveness of early college designs and gain additional insights about how the model works in various contexts.

### **Paramount Agriculture Career Academy: Career-focused regional design**

In central California's San Joaquin Valley, poverty rates are higher than the state average, with double-digit unemployment the norm throughout Kern, Kings, and Fresno counties. Yet vacancies abound in career positions in science, engineering, and business administration at major local employers such as Paramount Farms.

To address this skills gap, local partners with support from the state formed the Paramount Agriculture Career Academy (PACA) to increase college and career success among youth in the lower San Joaquin Valley, from Bakersfield to Fresno (Nodine, 2015). The partnership brings together high schools, community colleges, agriculture production and processing companies, and Paramount Education Programs

(PEP), which provides planning and management support. PACA is targeting four communities with the vision to prepare youth for college and career success—and advance tomorrow's agricultural, business, science, and technology leaders.

Their vision is to create multiple paths that will enable students to realize their aspirations from graduating high school with several college credits and pursuing majors in liberal arts, sciences, and engineering.

PACA combines an early college model that provides a rigorous program of study with substantial college credits while in high school and a career academy with three agriculture-themed pathways—including work-based learning opportunities—that lead directly to well-paying, mid-level career positions in agriculture. PACA's partners for the 2014-15 school year include four high schools, three community colleges, and six major agricultural companies. The program will grow each year as incoming classes enroll. By 2018, at least 200 high school students

**FIGURE 1.**  
**Jobs for the Future's Back on Track through college mode**

#### **Enriched preparation**

Integrates high-quality college- and career-ready instruction with strong academic and social supports.

#### **Postsecondary bridging**

Builds college- and career-ready skills and provides informed transition counseling.

#### **First-year support**

Offers appropriate supports in the first year of college to ensure postsecondary persistence and success.

**Source:** Jobs for the Future

will be earning their associate degrees or technical certificates in agriculture annually.

The pathway programs feature three fields in high demand in the Central Valley, pay well, and lead to promising careers: agricultural business management, agricultural mechanics, and plant science. All partners have committed financially to the PACA model, including funding from the The Wonderful Company, the parent company of Paramount Farms, and the California Career Pathways Trust as well as resources and facilities by schools and community colleges, and commitments for paid internships from partnering agricultural companies.

PACA targets all students who want to pursue college and careers while in high school. Participating students volunteer for the academy and, along with their parents, commit to the program's rigorous requirements, such as summer school, after-school, college course taking, and leadership activities. Students reflect the demographics of their high schools: About 82% receive free or reduced-price school lunch, 50% are English learners, and 92% are from minority ethnic or racial groups.

**Research reinforcement:** *Studies have shown a wide range of benefits associated with career academy designs similar to PACA, including better attendance, more credits earned toward graduation, increased grade point averages, better retention through high school, lower need for remediation in college, and higher earnings over eight years after high school (Hoffman, 2015; Stern, Dayton, & Raby, 2010).*

### **X-Cel Education, Massachusetts: Back on Track for struggling students and former dropouts**

Early college designs have provided a foundation for back-on-track programming, targeting a significant group of students: young people who leave school without a diploma. This group of students is most often written off, left without any viable option to re-engage with educational institutions, and therefore left out of the competition for well-paying jobs. Fortunately, a growing number of social entrepreneurs in many areas across the country have refused to give up on these young people.

Starting in 2010, using lessons learned in the implementation of early college designs, and in partnership with three national networks — YouthBuild USA, the National Employment Coalition, and the Corps Network — JFF developed the Back on Track (BOT) model. BOT is a pathway to college and careers specifically designed for off-track and out-of-school students. The approach enables them to earn a high school credential and go on to further education and training with the goal of achieving a successful career.

Back on Track can be used in designing or enhancing both diploma-granting and high school equivalency programming. It articulates three overlapping program phases and accompanying features designed to prepare off-track students and returning dropouts for the intensity of postsecondary academics; support their transition to postsecondary education; and ensure that they complete the critical first year of their postsecondary education.

The success and spread of early college designs are largely due to impressive outcomes with low-income and other underrepresented youth.

The partnership between X-Cel Education, a community-based program in Boston and Bunker Hill Community College, is illustrative of how this works. Drawing on the BOT model, X-Cel has modified its work to help young people who did not graduate from high school attain an equivalency diploma. To ensure that these young people do not stop at a diploma, X-Cel added a college-bridge program with a focus on college-ready instruction, college navigation, and financial aid application, and it also offers a supported dual-enrollment class taught by an X-Cel instructor.

According to Don Sands, X-Cel's executive director, graduates are now much better prepared to succeed on Bunker Hill's college placement test as well as in gatekeeper courses that trip up many first-year students. Bunker Hill Community College, like many community colleges, is enrolling a growing number of underprepared young people who have to take developmental education courses before engaging in any college-level work. By establishing bridge programs and partnerships with organizations like X-Cel, the college is gaining a steady supply of motivated young adults who are better prepared for college and more likely to persist and graduate.

The added bonus for the colleges is that the students often have continuing support from their sending programs. For example, X-Cel staff have dedicated office space at Bunker Hill Community College so they can check in on students regularly to help ensure they have what they need to succeed. To expand its reach, X-Cel was recently awarded a grant from the Boston Opportunity Youth Collaborative to operate a Connection Center that will recruit and assess 20- to 24-year-olds with a high school credential throughout Boston and help them enroll in postsecondary education and training.

As this example illustrates partnerships are critical to Back-on-Track schools as well. When designed strategically, these partnerships deliver efficiencies that make it possible for schools/programs and community colleges to provide low-income, underprepared students with the services and supports they need to succeed in postsecondary education — education at lower costs than the programs and community colleges would likely incur if they worked alone.

**Research reinforcement:** *In order to best serve our least prepared youth, approaches must meet them where they are and seek to re-engage, fill learning gaps, address social and emotional needs, rebuild supportive and trusting relationships, and instill in them the kinds of lifelong learning techniques necessary for their success (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012; Lewis et al., 2014; Tatum, 2012; Noguera, Darling-Hammond, & Friedlaender, 2015).*

Thus far, results are promising: These young people graduate from high school, enroll in college, and persist in the first year at two to three times the rate of their peers. For example, in one study, 71% of all students entering YouthBuild USA's first cohort of Postsecondary Success Initiative sites earned a high school diploma or a GED — even though over 90% of them had dropped out of previous schools and many were disconnected from both school and work. Of the graduates, 51% enrolled in postsecondary education, and 59% of those persisted through their first year (Center for Youth and Communities, 2013). Through Opportunity Works, a Social Innovation Fund-supported initiative, Jobs for the Future and the Aspen Forum for Community Solutions are further developing this evidence base by rigorously testing parts of the Back on Track model in seven communities around the country.



*"I've lost track. Am I taking you to basketball practice, hockey practice, wrestling practice, or band practice?"*

As a nation, we have not done a good job ensuring that everyone has an equal opportunity to earn a postsecondary credential, which we know is a passport to a family-sustaining career. Early college designs can go a long way in addressing inequities in college access and completion. They have the potential to make the college aspirations of millions of young people a reality. Now we need to muster the political will to invest in what we know that works. ■

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