



Early College High School Initiative

Accelerated Learning for All

by Nancy Hoffman and Katie Bayerl

“I used to detest waking up in the morning and heading off to school. Classes were filled with lazy birds that didn’t want to be there, and soon I turned into one of those birds. Since coming to this program, I enjoy coming to classes. People I talk to want to succeed. All in all, my attitude about school has risen dramatically.”

—Gateway to College student

Imagine that you’re a ninth-grade student. You’re ambivalent about school. You’ve never done well, and you aren’t sure what the future holds in store. In fact, you seem to meet all the criteria of a typical drop out.

Imagine what it would take to get you to graduate from high school and make a smooth transition into college. What if your school put you on track to earn some college credits during your high school years? Could an “accelerated curriculum” that pushed you to go further and faster help someone like you?

An “early college” experience is exactly what is helping thousands of high school students attain college degrees before they finish high school, even if they are the first in their family to attend college and, often, among the most struggling students of their age group. Currently, over 125 early college high schools have opened across the country; these autonomous high schools will serve 45,000 students at full capacity. The Early College High School Initiative, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and others, is a

radical secondary-postsecondary redesign that targets populations underserved in higher education.

The first cohorts of students completed early college high school in 2005. Their successes are impressive:

In an impoverished neighborhood of Wilmington, California, most of Harbor Teacher Preparation Academy’s 50 graduates also earned Associate’s degrees. All of the school’s juniors and seniors passed the California High School Exit Examination. The dropout rate was 0 and the attendance rate was 97 percent.

In Salt Lake City, the Academy for Math, Engineering and Science graduated its first 52 students this spring. All but one passed the state exam, and 49 plan to attend college in the fall. AMES seniors have received college scholarships, grants, and financial aid totaling over \$450,000.

Early college students have earned national honors as well. AMES graduating student, Alejandria Garcia, was awarded the prestigious Gates Millennium Scholarship, and three graduates of the early college program at Friendship Collegiate Academy in Washington, DC, were recipients of the highly competitive Posse Scholarship—an extraordinary rate for one school.

And the concept of accelerated learning options is spreading. In 2002, the U.S. Department of Education commissioned an extensive study of “credit-based transition programs.” The name signaled an innovative and welcome trend: the use of college-level learning



For more information on the Early College High School Initiative, see www.earlycolleges.org or www.jff.org.

in high school not just to propel advanced students more quickly to college but to improve the transition from high school to college for a wide range of students—including those whose parents never set foot on a college campus.

The theory is that students who earn some college credit while still in high school will be more confident about what's required for going on to college. Credit-based transition programs—which we prefer to call accelerated learning options—are a promising strategy to increase the number of young people getting college degrees, especially those young people at risk of struggling in today's economy.

It is widely accepted by now that everyone needs some post-secondary education, and that interest has fueled exponential growth in the variety and volume of accelerated learning options. Accelerated learning options encompass the well-known Advanced Placement offerings at many high schools but also the International Baccalaureate, dual enrollment arrangements, early college high schools, and middle colleges.

When the National Center for Education Statistics released the first nationwide attempt to size the enrollment phenomenon, even savvy educators were surprised at how extensive accelerated learning options are. In the 2002–03 school year, NCEES reported, there were an estimated 1.8 million enrollments in AP courses, 1.2 million enrollments in courses for dual credit, and 165,000 enrollments in IB courses. Indeed, 71 percent of high schools had accelerated learning. In a number of states, 20 percent of students graduate with college credit.

The numbers have increased since then, especially in AP, which is subsidized by states and the U.S. Department of Education, and with the advent of early college high schools—autonomous small schools that combine grades 9 through 14 and formally partner public schools with postsecondary institutions. Early college students can graduate in four or five years with up to 60 college credits. Eventually, the initiative will encompass about 240 early college high schools in 23 states, and the idea of combining high school and college in one institution has attracted the attention of policymakers and education reformers across the nation.

The rationale for acceleration. College-level work for high-achieving high school students certainly makes sense, but shouldn't underprepared students spend more time catching up rather than trying for college-credit? The answer, counterintuitive as it may seem, is no. The idea behind accelerated learning is that challenge is a greater motivator than remediation. Remediation carries a negative message—that of repeating or doing over something at which one has failed.

Accelerated learning approaches, in contrast, take seriously what many dropouts and disengaged students say: we are bored, and we will work hard if you expect a lot of us, a sentiment confirmed by recent polling data that got a big-time audience when Bill Gates appeared on *Oprah*. And because most accelerated learning options

not only improve academic performance but also come at no cost to the student, families get behind the proposition. For every college-level credit a young person earns in high school, his or her family saves precious tuition dollars needed for the later years of college.

As recently as five years ago, accelerated learning was a marginal venture. There was Advanced Placement for privileged students whose families knew how to search out ways to help their daughters and sons escape the routines of high school. In some states, gifted students also had access to regular college courses on a college campus. These accelerated learning options almost exclusively served well-prepared high school seniors who suffered from that well-publicized phenomenon—the wasted senior year.

Early colleges didn't exist, and the intellectually demanding, comprehensive International Baccalaureate was more likely completed in an English language school abroad than in the United States, not in schools serving underprepared, inner-city students. Some low-performing students took courses on college campuses, but with few exceptions they enrolled in vocational or technical subjects, not American history, college composition, or psychology.

Flash forward to 2006. Students are taking the challenge and completing rigorous college curricula while enrolled in high school. Inner-city students have come to view accelerated learning as a way of signaling to their teachers, their peers, and themselves that they are focused on their education and planning to go to college.

As one student in a Rhode Island accelerated program reported,

It's like I'm so much more important to the teachers now that I'm [taking college courses]. They pay attention to me because they know I'm serious and I'm not going to fool around in class and miss assignments and stuff like that. I'm college-bound now.

Another student from Dayton Early College, in Ohio, says,

I didn't think I was cut out for college... because I was having problems with reading and math and everything.... I'm reading a lot better than I was, and I'm doing really well in math.... It's because I'm learning more and have more confidence in myself.

With the early college high school initiative only a few years old, and other accelerated learning options expanding rapidly, it is, of course, too soon to declare that challenge not remediation is the way for schools to go if we want more college graduates and better lives for our young people. But preliminary data from the early college high school initiative are promising, and thousands of high school students who never thought they'd attend college are well on their way to a college degree.

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