

Early College in Maine: Expanding Opportunities

A Summary
January 2008

Educational attainment in Maine is below the national average and significantly behind the rest of New England. **As we look for better outcomes, early college is emerging as a leading strategy for change.** Early college, also known as dual enrollment, is defined here as high school students taking college courses for both college and high school credit. Typically, students enroll in a college class at a campus near their high school. Maine also has a widespread distance learning early college program.

This report discusses early college programs in Maine that target underperforming students in order to improve the likelihood that they will complete high school, aspire to college, improve their academic preparation, and enroll in college after graduation. **Our findings show that when students facing barriers to college participate in early college, often just one class, they go on to college at much higher rates: 80% compared with 60% of their classmates.**

Over the past several years, Maine has at least doubled the numbers of high school students participating in early college opportunities from 1,000 to 2,000 students. Potential benefits of early college include:

- ◆ **Increasing the academic rigor** students experience in high school by exposing them directly to college-level work.

Four in five 2006 graduates who had participated in early college (80%) enrolled in college within a year after graduation, compared with a 60% overall college-going rate at their schools.

- ◆ **Providing access to more electives** than are available at the high school.
- ◆ **Improving the aspirations** of students who do not thrive in high school, and consequently may not consider themselves “college material.”
- ◆ **Enhancing the senior year** by giving students who have completed high school graduation requirements challenging, motivating coursework.
- ◆ **Familiarizing students with college life**, particularly when courses are taken on a college campus, taught by a college faculty member in a classroom with undergraduate students.
- ◆ **Reducing college costs** by allowing students to earn college credits, in some cases at no cost, thus reducing their time to degree.

Nationally, forty-seven states now have dual enrollment policies in place. Some programs offer college courses delivered at high schools, while others integrate high school students into courses on college campuses. Several national foundations have invested in various early college models, including creating entirely new early college high schools on or

adjacent to college campuses. Rapid growth in early college participation has been documented in many states. National research finds that early college experiences increase students' academic performance and educational attainment. Most early college students earn passing grades in their college courses, and they tend to be admitted to college at much higher rates than their socioeconomic peers.

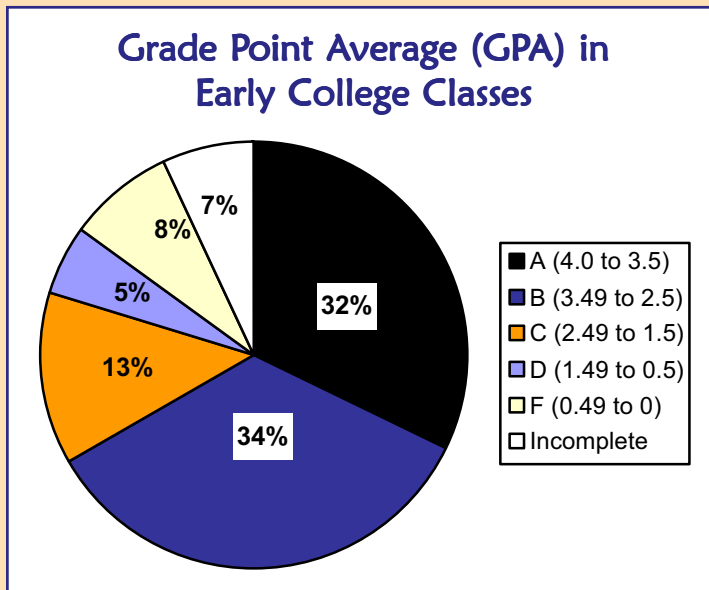
In Maine, early college has been available to a limited number of high-achieving students for many years. More recently, early college opportunities have become available to a wider spectrum of students. The number of dual enrollment early college opportunities for Maine students has also increased rapidly in the past several years. We estimate that the number of dual enrollment early college courses Maine high school students took doubled from around 1,000 in 2005-2006 to well over 2,000 in 2006-2007. Some high schools are making it a goal to eventually provide early college experiences to every student.

Student Characteristics and Outcomes

This report is based on the experiences of 690 Maine high school students who took early college

courses in spring 2006, fall 2006, and/or spring 2007. Key findings include:

- ◆ **Nearly three-quarters (72%) of these early college students are from families in which neither parent holds a bachelor's degree.**



- ◆ The average high school GPA when students applied for early college was 87.3 on a 100-point scale.

- ◆ Just over one-half (52%) of participants improved their high school GPA during the semester(s) in which they took an early college class, with an average increase of 2.9 points.

- Male students were more likely than female students—55% compared with 48%—to

improve their high school GPA while participating in early college.

- 60% of first-generation students (those whose parents do not have education beyond high school) improved their high school GPA while they were participating in early college.

- ◆ **Nearly four in five early college students (79%) earned grades of 2.0 (equivalent to a C) or higher in their college courses, thus earning potentially transferable college credits.**



Samantha

Samantha took two college courses, English Composition and Drama, during her senior year of high school, and earned a 4.0 GPA. Samantha says, "I enjoyed both of my classes and didn't have a problem keeping up with the homework." Samantha had a high school GPA of 84.1 (C+) before taking early college courses. "My high school classes were not very challenging. This made my high school experience very dull, and I didn't care as much about my school work because it was too easy." During her last high school semester, Samantha earned a 94.8 GPA. Samantha is now enrolled at the University of Maine at Farmington as a full-time student.

As a first-generation college student, Samantha says, "I was very scared about going to college... [Early college] prepared me for the work load that I now have. Secondly, it made me feel more comfortable and ready to go off to college and get a degree."

Joshua

Joshua, now a senior, describes his high school experience before participating in early college as “boring, not challenging...I lacked interest in most of the classes I was taking, but I had to take them because of the curriculum requirements. It didn’t take long for me to be fed up with the high school’s system and I started getting apathetic.” Joshua has taken college courses at Bates College and USM as well as an online course through UMaine’s Academ-e. His parents and brother all began college but left without a degree, and Joshua plans to enroll in a four-year college next year. “I think the largest barrier is the almighty dollar. I’m really grateful to the early college program for giving me more options and challenges while footing the bill.”



- 74% of male early college students earned college grades of 2.0 or higher.
- 83% of first-generation early college students earned grades of 2.0 or higher in their college courses.
- ◆ In the class of 2006, 95% of students from five high schools who participated in early college during their senior year graduated on time. The overall on-time graduation rate at those schools was 88%.
- ◆ **Four in five 2006 graduates who had participated in early college (80%) enrolled in college within a year after graduation, compared with a 60% overall college-going rate at their schools.**

Student Observations about Early College

Asked to rate their experience at college, 92% of early college students rated it positively. One-half (50%) of respondents rated their college experience *excellent*, 42% rated it *good*, 7% rated it *fair*, and 1% rated it *poor*. Student comments included:

- ◆ “At first I thought it was going to be difficult to adjust to adding another class, but it was an easy transition.”
- ◆ “I grew up a lot. Since it was a college course I never wanted to blow it off. I matured as I made sure I was at class on time and always did my assignments.”
- ◆ “My experience was absolutely wonderful; an amazing teacher, a great class and a very special environment. The only thing that could be easier is the way grades are transferred to

my high school. I really love this program and am extremely pleased with my time here.”

- ◆ “The program made me more comfortable and confident with the idea of going to college.”

Program Insights

- ◆ Programs that serve more “at-risk” students have higher course failure rates. One important policy consideration is designing programs to ensure that students are not punished for early college course failures or withdrawals. This gives students the chance to experience college-level work relatively risk-free. Even for students who did not earn college credits, this “reality check” may help them to ultimately be more successful in college than they otherwise would have. The majority (63%) of students who did not successfully complete their early college courses still reported that they expect to go to college full-time after graduation.
- ◆ It takes several semesters for early college programs to get to scale. High schools and colleges must build partnerships, develop and implement processes and protocols at each site, and build student awareness and demand.
- ◆ Sustainability is a challenge for early college programs. Many early college programs started with multi-year grants, then had difficulty replacing the funds when the grant periods ended. Successful high school sites have built early college line items into their budgets, and they rely on tuition waivers from colleges and state funds to cover some of the costs.



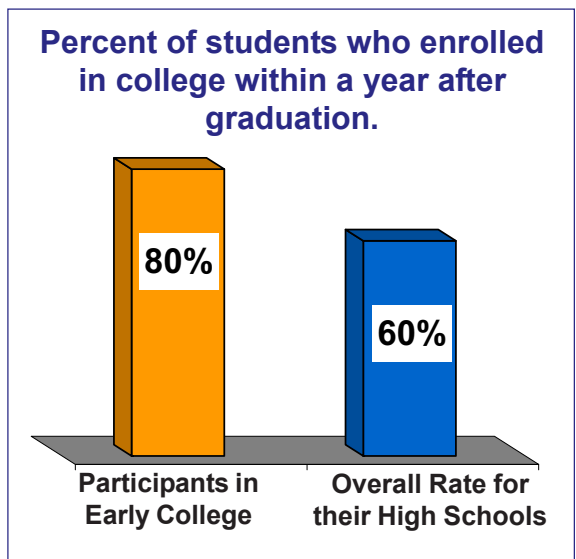
Recommendations

Improving college-going among recent high school graduates is one important way to raise educational attainment in our state, and early college programs show promise for helping to achieve this. The early college students we studied were more likely to matriculate into college than their peers. Particularly when early college programs serve underperforming high school students and those who face greater than average barriers to college, they have the potential to help more students both to develop college aspirations and to realize those aspirations.

Maine's state government, local school districts, and colleges and universities can work together to ensure that effective early college opportunities are available to growing numbers of students:

districts, colleges, and universities should each contribute to ensure that adequate funding is in place and is designed to grow with demand.

2) **Identify and deliberately target underperforming students to participate in early college programs.** Students who face more barriers to college stand to gain the most from participating in early college programs, and there is compelling evidence that many of them are up to the challenge.



3) **Provide support for all early college students, and conduct outreach to ensure that students know how to access available support.** At each high school and college, part of a staff

person's time should be devoted to administering the early college program.

1) **Provide stable funding for early college.** The state, local school

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