

Issue in Brief: Early College Designs

Overview

Success in college is about more than just “getting in.” Acceptance does not guarantee that students are ready for more advanced coursework or on a pathway that leads to a career and family-sustaining wage. Further, students may be academically prepared but face challenges with other aspects of college life due to a lack of familiarity with the college-going experience. Rising costs also are a problem, particularly when academic or non-academic difficulties add to the duration and expense of earning a degree. Without preparation, guidance, and support, many students choose to leave when confronted with new challenges (academic or otherwise).

Early college designs allow students to take college courses while still in high school and earn both high school and college credits simultaneously. Especially for students who do not think of themselves as college-bound, early college eases the transition from high school to college and increases persistence rates by exposing students to postsecondary academic requirements and cultural norms. It can also reduce the time and cost of completing a degree.

In this policy brief, the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy aims to expand the conversation about preparing all students for success in college and the workforce by examining early college designs. To that end, the research team:

- Scanned recent literature on early college designs to find research-based, effective practices for developing partnerships between secondary and postsecondary institutions;
- Identified three early college partnerships that provide students with college experiences while in high school; and
- Compiled cost estimates for replicating program strategies across Massachusetts public school districts.

The Massachusetts Context

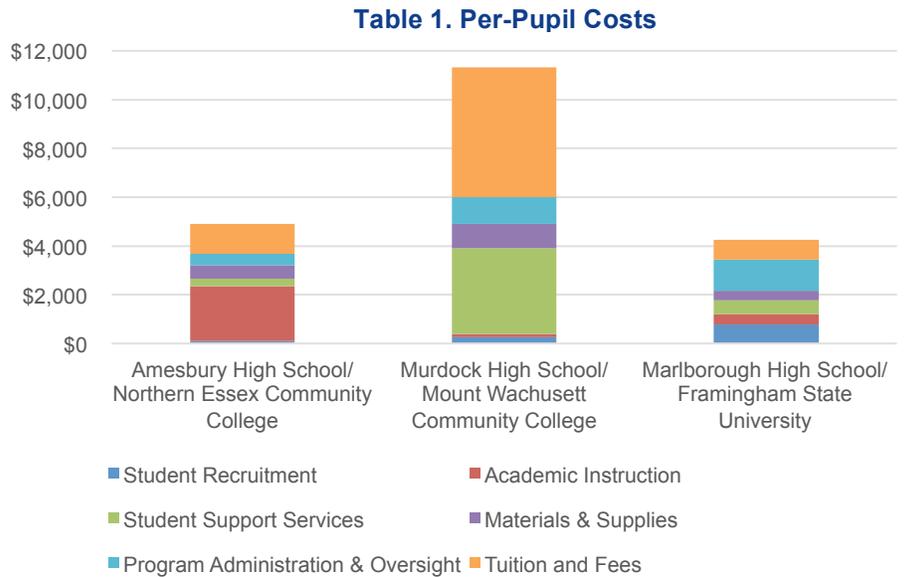
Early college designs encompass a diverse array of programs. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Department of Higher Education, and Executive Office of Education, with support from Jobs for the Future, recently released a document on the early college design landscape that articulates a range of program models.¹ The list of potential models includes, for example, partnerships that link career, vocational, and technical education in secondary school to postsecondary institutions; intensive, cohort-based models to support at-risk students in earning college credit; and programs that span grades 6-14, including those with a specific focus on a particular academic discipline like STEM. The Early College Design Landscape document also highlighted certain early college program components that can have an impact in bridging secondary to postsecondary transitions and building college- and career-ready skills, such as district and college partnerships, earned college credit, linked high school and college curriculum, career development education, and student support services. While a number of robust early college designs can be found in Massachusetts, it is important to continue exploring and expanding early college experiences as a means of preparing all students for future success.

The Evidence: Promising Practice in Early College Designs

This document presents findings from the research study *Early College Designs: Achieving College- and Career-Readiness for All*, part of the *Roadmap to Expanding Opportunity: Evidence on What Works in Education* series of issue briefs. Findings present the cost of research-based promising practices and the characteristics of effective early college programs. While there are many types of early college models throughout the Commonwealth, this report focuses on programs that employ evidence-based strategies, including the following key components:

- Students complete and obtain credit for rigorous, college-level coursework;
- Mechanisms are in place to identify and address knowledge and skill gaps prior to high school graduation;
- Students can accumulate at least one semester worth of credits that are transferable to a postsecondary program;
- Students are exposed to college campuses and new cultural norms;
- Programs offer integrated student support services;
- High school and college curricula are aligned; and
- Strong partnerships are in place between school districts and institutions of higher education.

For the 2013-14 academic year, total per-participant costs for the three highlighted programs ranged from \$4,252 to \$11,319. These costs are driven by the number of potential college credits students can earn, the intensity of program activities, the number and type of faculty engaged, and the level and kinds of support services offered (see Table 1 at right for total costs and the cost of each component).



Policy Considerations

For State Policymakers

Promote the expansion of early college opportunities for students. Early college designs enable Massachusetts’ public institutions of higher education to capture students who are not part of the historical college-going population, as well as students who would not necessarily choose public higher education when faced with the full range of postsecondary options.

Issue guidance on the use of Commonwealth Dual Enrollment Partnership (CDEP) funds. While the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education has begun to prioritize strategic use of CDEP funds, currently there are no formal policies that align the use, distribution, and monitoring of CDEP funds with evidence-based practices.

Fund planning grants to encourage the development of early college designs. Planning can be among the most resource-intensive aspects of developing early college programs and is often difficult to fund. Planning grants can identify practices to be applied to the development or expansion of programs in the future.

For Districts and Institutions of Higher Education

Develop innovative solutions to reduce program costs between partners. High school and college partners can explore cost-effective ways to offer personalized learning and supports for students, such as in-kind exchanges or online courses.

Begin preparing students for college on their first day of school. From the time students enter school, their teachers, counselors, and other support personnel should have the tools, data, and interventions necessary to identify and attend to any academic, social, and emotional challenges that students face.

Prepare students for college-level coursework and address readiness gaps. The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education recommends that students complete the Massachusetts High School Program of Studies to promote readiness for rigorous, college-level courses.

Develop a staffing structure that supports both students and course instructors. Effective program models require staff whose time is dedicated to ensuring the success of early college partnerships.

¹ Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2015). Success after high school: Early college designs. Malden, MA: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, Massachusetts Executive Office of Education, & Jobs for the Future.