

Early college puts youth on a college track

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Abstract:

Early colleges are a rapidly spreading effort to increase students' access to postsecondary education. Think of them as a proven college transition program for traditionally underrepresented students.

Keywords: early colleges | students | college transition | underrepresented students

Article:

*****Note: Full text of article below**

Early college puts youth on a college track

Jamal's choice to pursue early college changed the trajectory of his life, putting him on a path to college and out of harm's way.



Julie A. Edmunds

Early colleges are a rapidly spreading effort to increase students' access to postsecondary education. Think of them as a proven college transition program for traditionally under-represented students. They incorporate features shown to make a difference in a student's transition to college, such as:

- College preparatory courses in high school that are needed for college entry (Finkelstein & Fong, 2008);
- Access to college courses while students are in high school, with the goal of giving students up to two years of college credit or an associate degree by the time they graduate from high school (Adelman, 2006);
- A college-oriented environment that provides explicit instruction in college-going skills; assistance with college applications and financial aid forms (Koyama, 2007; Roderick et al., 2008);
- An instructional framework aligned to college expectations (Conley, 2011); and
- Extensive supports to help students meet higher expectations (Knight-Diop, 2010; Lee & Smith, 1999).

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These components are implemented within the context of a comprehensive reform model that also focuses on creating a professional environment for school staff that incorporates collaboration and collective responsibility for students. Many early colleges are also small schools on the campuses of two-year or four-year institutions.

For the past nine years, with funding from the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences, a multi-institution research team led by SERVE Center at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has been studying the effect of early colleges in North Carolina. We used a lottery-based experimental design and followed students who went through a lottery and were randomly selected to get into or not get into an early college. This means our study is comparing apples to apples. While much of our data come from administrative data collected from schools by the state department of education, we also interviewed students and staff and collected their stories.

Jamal was 18 years old and in his final year of an early college on the campus of a historically black university when I interviewed him. I use his words to help tell the story of who the early college serves, what an early college looks like, and what the effect of the early college has been — interspersed with some of the findings from our study. He began by telling a little bit about himself and how he got to the early college.

***Jamal:** My neighborhood used to be a Crips strip. They were some crack houses, a murder, shootings, breaking-and-entering. The police started cracking down and it got better.*

I didn't come from a broken home. I had parents who cared for me. When I was in elementary school, I never, ever made anything less than an A or a B. As I got older, I started behaving worse. I guess I'm attention seeking. In 6th grade, it went downhill. I was running away from home. I'd get in trouble at home and would run away from home. The more trouble I got in, the harder it was at home. Seventh grade, it was close to hitting rock bottom. I got in a fight and got a 10-day suspension. They were going to kick me out, but a lady saw I had potential and got me transferred to another school.

At the new school, my grades were horrible, I just had D's and F's; I just gave up on my academics. Nobody liked me. I stood no chance over there; they tried to start fights with me. The teachers over there were immature; if they didn't like you, they showed it. Around this time, there was a high school fair where I heard about Hancock Early College, and I thought this was a golden opportunity. I had my interview here and it was perfect.

In middle school, my English teacher gave me a 69.4. The class was easy, but I didn't do the work so I failed 8th grade. After I found out I failed 8th grade — same day, the letter came accepting me to Hancock, but I couldn't go. I transferred to be in 9th grade in a Christian school, but it was no different. People were fighting, smoking, having sex in the sanctuary. The only reason I was there was to get accepted to Hancock Early College. I wasn't doing my work so they threw me back into 8th grade.

Early colleges are designed to serve students for whom access to college historically has been problematic. The target populations for North Carolina's early colleges are students who would be the first in their family to go to college, low-income students, and students who are members of racial or ethnic groups underrepresented in college. In some ways, Jamal was a good fit for the early college, although his behavior initially may have given school administrators some pause. He was capable of doing the work, but he was not performing to his potential because of his environment — both in and outside of school.

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Good candidates for early college include students who might have otherwise struggled in a regular high school because of social or other factors.

One of the people I was cool with at the high school, he was driving, and he got shot at. He went back and got a gun and shot at them. He got locked up for it. He was a smart kid, a good person, and could play basketball really well. Now, he's just a convict.

struggled in a regular high school because of social or other factors. For example, one student in a different early college said, “we’re all a bunch of misfits who didn’t fit into our high schools. We are. Seriously.”

Jamal managed to successfully complete 8th grade the second time and enrolled in the early college. The early college principal had visited him periodically throughout his 8th grade year to check in and see that he was making progress toward coming. Jamal struggled for the first two years in early college, but the structure and environment of early college eventually helped him turn a corner.

***Jamal:** When I got here to Hancock, I couldn't shake the habits I made in middle school, and I stopped doing my work. I had an attitude. I was fighting in my neighborhood. I was running around with people who were doing stuff they shouldn't have been doing. I was getting in trouble here.*

Once I tried to start a fight with somebody here at school, but they didn't let me. There are not really any fighters here. Also, now you look really immature when you do that type of stuff here. It's just not a good look anymore. Back then it was funny. It was cool. 'Oh, he won. He's cool, blah, blah, blah.' You go to a public school now, you can get the recognition or respect because you can fight, but that's probably because they don't look at you like, 'oh, he's smart' or 'he's cool, he's going to do something with his life.' You don't really get that a lot at public school.

Here if you're smart, you can get the recognition for it. You can get the respect that you deserve for something positive.

My sophomore year, we started to look at colleges. I wanted to go to Chapel Hill, but I realized I couldn't get in with my grades. I saw my friends, the people that I looked at like they're going to be something one day. I saw them excelling, and it finally hit me that I need to straighten up what I'm doing so that I can excel. I also knew that I couldn't put my mother through this anymore. So, I came back my junior year, and I was just like, 'I'm done with all that.'

At Hancock, it is different. The classrooms are smaller, and the school is smaller altogether so the teachers know more about you than your name. They know where you come from and who you are as a person. So they know what your weaknesses are. They know what you're strong in and what you're capable of so your experience is better here. The workload is different, and it's not easy, and it's not too hard but it's challenging.

Jamal's description gives a sense of how life in early college is different from traditional high schools. In early colleges, academic pursuits are a priority for students. In North Carolina, early colleges are supported by the North Carolina New Schools and are required to implement six design principles that incorporate the components outlined earlier (North Carolina New Schools, 2013). On surveys administered to early college and control students, early college students reported higher teacher expectations for their academic performance, better teacher-student relationships, more rigorous and relevant instruction, and more frequent and varied types of student support. All of these differences were statistically significant (Edmunds et al., 2013).

One of the most common themes that came out of our focus group interviews with students was that relationships were very important in early colleges and that these relationships translated into students' motivation to work for their academic performance, academic support, and higher performance. A student at another early college said about the staff, “We feel like they’re our second parents so we don’t want to let them down.” Another student at a different school commented, “In high school classes, you get to really interact with the teachers, and they really want you to do your best. They’re not just like ‘oh, you’re just there.’ They actually talk to you, and if you’re struggling, they’ll talk to you about it.”

Once his early college experiences helped Jamal recognize that he needed to change, he was able to take advantage of the school's flexibility and accelerate his courses. He was able to retake high school courses for credit and start taking college courses.

***Jamal:** Starting my junior year, the principal let me stack up all my high school classes in my first semester; I needed to finish those classes... I took 18 credits of college classes the next semester and got all A's and B's. First semester of my senior year, I took 17 college credit hours, but I did get a D in math. I don't know how that happened.*

In the early college, all students are expected to take a college preparatory course of study. Our study shows that this has led to more students taking and succeeding in the courses they need for entrance to college (Edmunds et al., 2012). For example, by the time they graduate from high school, 77% of the early college students had successfully completed a college preparatory course of study compared to 68% of the control group. Early college students also begin taking college courses, typically from a partner community college as early as 9th grade. By the time they're juniors and seniors, most of their classes are college classes. Our study shows that by the time they complete 12th grade, early college students received an average of 25.5 college credits — about a year's worth of college credit — compared to approximately three credits earned by the average control student.

Unlike many of his friends from his neighborhood, Jamal was getting ready to graduate from high school and go on to further education at a university. Our study results show that early colleges make a difference in keeping students in school. The graduation rate for early college students in our study was about 4 percentage points higher than the graduation rate for the control group. This was similar to the results from another experimental study using a national sample of schools that found an effect of 5 percentage points (Berger et al., 2013). In interviews, students suggest that a big part of the reason they are staying in school is because of the relationships they have with teachers who will follow up with them if they don't come to school. In a focus group in another early college, one student commented that it was easier to stay in school than to drop out.

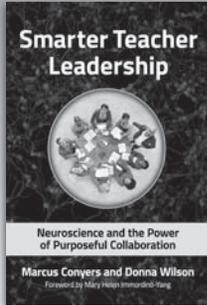
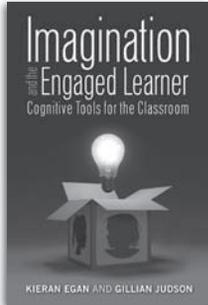
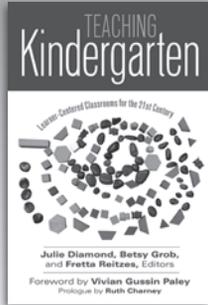
Our study also shows that early colleges increase students' enrollment in postsecondary education. From 9th grade through the beginning of their sixth year after entering high school, 90% of early college students had enrolled in postsecondary education compared to 75% of the control group. This means more students are getting credentials. By the end of their sixth year after starting high school, 29% of early college students had obtained a postsecondary credential compared to 4% of the control group (almost all of the credentials in both groups were associate degrees).

Jamal's story is one of a combination of caring adults working with him within the context of the supportive, challenging, early college environment. Although his story might be more dramatic than some, early college is clearly reaching many students and changing their life trajectories. These positive results have led to efforts to expand early college from its original setting in a small school on a college campus into a more comprehensive high school with the goal of making Jamal's experience more universal.

At the end of his time in high school,

Many early colleges are small schools located on the campuses of two-year or four-year institutions.

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My sophomore year, we started to look at colleges. I wanted to go to Chapel Hill, but I realized I couldn't get in with my grades.

Jamal had gained some perspective about where he grew up. I close with his thoughts about the role that early college played in his life.

***Jamal:** Coming to Hancock was a really good opportunity that I wouldn't give up. When you go here, you get to see where you were at from a distance rather than being in it. Since I've been here, I've lost three of my homeboys. One of the people I was cool with at the high school, he was driving, and he got shot at. He went back and got a gun and shot at them. He got locked up for it. He was a smart kid, a good person, and could play basketball really well. Now, he's just a convict. It seems like, had I been with them, that could have been me. So it's an eye opener. Once you see it from the outside, you see what it's really like. You don't want to be a part of that anymore. So that's why I don't see myself going back to that.*

I had to go through so much stuff to make me realize what I wanted. Everything happens for a reason. I was secretly smart. I think everybody is secretly smart.

It took a while, but had I not come here, I don't think I would have made it this far. I would have been on the streets or ended up in jail. Actually, I highly doubt that I would be alive right now. I highly doubt it.

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