

ADDRESSING THE 61ST HOUR CHALLENGE

COLLABORATING IN EL PASO TO CREATE SEAMLESS PATHWAYS FROM HIGH SCHOOL TO COLLEGE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over a decade ago, when the early college movement began in the United States, the ambition of those starting these new small schools was to put students at risk of not completing high school on an accelerated pathway to college completion. Early college high schools (ECHSs) are small public schools with built-in academic and social supports that integrate college courses with high school requirements, starting in ninth grade. With about 300 such schools now serving about 80,000 students across the U.S., the results are impressive. The majority of students are graduating from high school with an average of one year of college credit, at least one third graduate with a full Associate's degree, and 71 percent go on to postsecondary education.

The Texas Education Agency and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board working with the Communities Foundation of Texas and Educate Texas were among the first adopters of early college in the nation. Texas early colleges were built on the state's dual enrollment policy and a community college culture that encourages partnerships with high schools.

As of the 2015-16 year, Texas had 154 early colleges including 5 T-STEM/ECHS that blend early college and STEM. In addition, 4 CTE early colleges were designated in 2015-16.

Because of the proliferation of early colleges and the positive policy environment, an increasing number of Texas students are completing their Associate's degrees well before graduation from high school, often as juniors. Greater Texas Foundation (GTF), the organization that commissioned this paper, has been a long-time supporter of Texas's early college students and established a financial aid program for them in 2013. In following the progress of cohorts of early college students, GTF became concerned that high school students were continuing to take community college courses along with high school classes beyond the 60 credits required for the Associate's degree. As a result, ECHS students were losing an average of 18 credits in the transition to a four-year institution, credits that did not "count" toward degree requirements. Thus students' time and cost to degree were extended unnecessarily. Thus embedded within this success is what we are calling the "61st" credit problem.

The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) has been particularly successful in reaching the goal of graduating large numbers of ECHS students with minimal loss of college credit in the transfer to university. Practices at UTEP, El Paso Community College, and the partner El Paso feeder early college high schools hold lessons for early college advocates and leaders. In El Paso, educators are close to implementing a truly seamless system from grade nine through the Bachelor's degree. Since 2009, over 1,100 early college students have entered UTEP with junior-level status having completed an Associate's degree either before high school graduation or concurrent with it. These 16-18 year olds are on their way into the professions with their BA degrees, despite many coming

from families that have no college experience. To form such a seamless system requires concentrated effort. The pathways that have been developed in El Paso since the program's inception suggest that Texas in general and El Paso in particular can provide a national blueprint for successful development of early college programs that move large numbers of young people through to the bachelor's degree. Texas's success demonstrates that early college programs work and that they can be scaled and replicated.

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- Expose early college students to the academic and social expectations of college starting in ninth grade.
- Coordinate, sequence, and very carefully plan academic programs of study so no credits are lost.
- Provide specially tailored support services and guidance and a special "home" at the university dedicated to ECHS students.
- Communicate constantly—regular face-to-face meetings are best—among the collaborating institutions so that professionals working with ECHS students participate in a feedback and trouble-shooting loop
- Hold students to high expectations and take pride in student accomplishments including an attitude of "you can do it"—no matter the high poverty rates and challenges of a community.

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