



# COLLEGE CREDIT IN High SCHOOL

*Increasing College  
Attainment Rates  
for Underrepre-  
sented Students*

BY NANCY HOFFMAN

If an archaeologist were to search among the artifacts of high school reform, she would find layer upon fragmented layer of improvements—but with only tangential relationships with one another. Now, a seismic shift is causing some of these fragments of reform to rearrange them-

selves into a coherent

landscape. Pushing into view is a new policy of bedrock reform focused simultaneously on raising the achievement levels of high school students and getting more young people into and through post-secondary education.

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What joins these fragments? Over the last decade—and particularly in the last three years—opportunities have expanded for high school students to earn college credit. Added together, the cluster of current possibilities for high school students is both robust and diverse. *Advanced Placement* and *International Baccalaureate* courses and their accompanying tests give many students ways to take college-level courses from their regular teachers, usually during their senior year.

Students in *dual enrollment* programs remain formally enrolled in high school but take college courses, taught by either high school or college faculty, in classrooms located either at their high school or on a college campus. At the same time, more and more *community colleges* are developing ways to accelerate high school students (as well as high school dropouts) by enrolling them in college courses. Meanwhile, a variety of *postsecondary incentive programs* reward students with free or reduced college tuition for finishing some college work in high school. And, at the most dramatic end of the continuum, students at *middle colleges* and *Early College High Schools* can complete up to two years of a college program while still enrolled in high school.

This explosion of options for students to earn college credit in high school underscores our progress in creating a seamless education system from kindergarten through college (K-16). It also highlights the contributions standards-based reform plays in promoting higher levels of achievement in high school and readying students for college. These many possibilities add up to a small, but very real, invasion of the no-man's-land between high school and college.

Until recently, this educational terrain belonged almost exclusively to a small, privileged group of young people: those whose families could afford high-quality private high schools and those in well-funded public school districts that offered Advanced Placement (AP) and similar options to their highest-achieving students.

But today's programs that allow students to earn college credit in high school are no longer limited to elite schools. Students from a wide range of backgrounds and with diverse prior accomplishments are also demonstrating that the academic challenge provided by college-level courses can be an inspiration, not a barrier. The question for the future is the degree to which opportunities like these will be able to increase the number of young people who gain a postsecondary credential—especially among those who remain badly underrepresented in higher education.

## TWO TRANSITIONS: TO HIGH SCHOOL AND TO POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

Born in the wake of the struggle for civil rights and bolstered by the implementation of affirmative action, the move-

ment to diversify the population of young people entering college has indeed made progress. In general, college campuses are more diverse today than they were four decades ago. Nonetheless, access, retention, and graduation rates still correlate strikingly with race, income, and family educational background.

Only 18 percent of African Americans and 10 percent of Hispanics complete a four-year college degree by the time they are 29, compared to 34 percent of whites (*Digest of Educational Statistics*, 2001). Native-American students are less likely to complete a college degree than any other ethnic group in the United States. Most compelling of all, upper-income students are *seven times* more likely than low-income students to earn a bachelor's degree by age 24.

While underrepresented learners are distributed across all kinds of colleges and universities, they are concentrated at open-admissions two-year colleges and less selective four-year institutions. (I use the term "underrepresented" here to mean the following groups of traditionally aged college students who are students of color, first-generation college-goers, and students whose first language is not English.) Additional data highlight the cause for concern (data from Barton and Adelman in Resources):

### **Access to college:**

- In the 18- to 24-year-old group, about 90 percent of white students complete high school, but only 81 percent of African Americans and 63 percent of Hispanics do so.
- 90 percent of current high school seniors expect to attend college, but only 75 percent of high school graduates actually do so.
- A top-quartile low-income student is less likely to enter college than a bottom-quartile high-income student.

### **College completion:**

- One-third of college entrants drop out before their second year, and over half fail to complete a degree at the institution where they began.
- First-generation college students are about twice as likely as those with college-educated parents to leave a four-year college before their second year.
- African Americans, who represent 16 percent of the current 15- to 18-year-old population, earn only 10 percent of all associate degrees; and Hispanics, who constitute 14 percent of the population, earn only 7 percent of associate degrees.

Urgent concerns of both equity and access clearly persist: Students should be able to choose a postsecondary institution on the basis of what best suits their talents and interests, without being tracked by race and income. Rates of earning associate and baccalaureate degrees for students of color and for first-generation students should be much higher. As it penetrates the no-man's-land between high school and college, the school reform effort is poised to pay increased attention to these issues.

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During the past five years, high-stakes testing and high school reform, implemented on a nation-wide basis, attempted to improve student success in the first big transition: the leak in the education pipeline at about ninth grade, when leaving school is legal. To fix this leak, many school reform models depend on such programs as ninth-grade academies, supplemental skills courses, and structures to socialize adolescents to the demands of high school.

These programs simultaneously redesign institutions and demand more of students. Now, as the “tested” generation reaches college-going age, huge questions arise about the transition to postsecondary education. Who graduates from high school? Who gets into college? How well do they do and how can they afford it? Who is attaining a college credential?

At the same time, passionate educators from small high schools, as well as the many “schools-within-schools” that have sprung up over the last five years, are graduating their first classes and are tracking the success of their graduates into college. These educators are discovering that college retention and graduation are the next big hurdles. As a result, myriad—and increasingly loud—voices shout at one another about standards, high-stakes testing, and accountability. All of them seem to agree on one thing: students should graduate from high school prepared for non-remedial college-level work.

Young people and families know that college is a critical goal. Policymakers see college as necessary for labor force development and effective civic participation. Legislators and governors seek to improve college preparation through their K-12 accountability systems. Yet success rates in attaining an associate or baccalaureate degree remain low for all students—and especially for underrepresented populations.

There is growing evidence that underrepresented students—and not just those with vocational orientations served by programs like Tech Prep—are beginning to take advantage of the many opportunities to earn college credit while still enrolled in high school. Although small in numbers so far, these students are sufficiently committed to attending college to opt for higher levels of academic challenge.

They appear to be motivated by several factors including the chance to save money, the chance to prove that they can do college-level work, and the chance to speed entrance to a career. If this is the case, we need to know a lot more about this trend. And we need to use what we find out to expand opportunities to provide college work in high school as an additional strategy for increasing the attainment rate of postsecondary credentials.

As Michael Kirst and Kathy Bracco point out in *Bridging the Great Divide*, students in advanced, honors, or accelerated tracks get signals that they are college-bound. They receive well-designed college recruitment information, use

college texts, and are automatically prepped for college entrance exams.

But what can we learn from a young person who is on the verge of dropping out of high school but who flourishes when put in the company of college freshmen in a demanding first-year-college English course? Or from an inner-city 15-year-old who does well in a community college’s selective and challenging computer graphics program? Or from the enthusiasm with which an entire urban high school class gets competitive about passing AP calculus?

## IMPROVING THE SECOND TRANSITION

To describe the terrain between high school and college, we need a new vocabulary. What do we actually mean by “college

credit in high school?” To address the need for a common language, researchers have arrived at a reasonable taxonomy that defines the most prevalent forms of earning college credit in high school. Its principal elements are as follows:

- **Examination-based college credit**, exemplified by Advanced Placement (AP), has the longest and most visible history. Established in the 1950s for prep-school students, about 700,000 students take over one million AP exams today. The much smaller, and even more challenging, International Baccalaureate program serves 1,382 institutions in 114 countries—including some inner-city high schools in the United States. Interest in the International Baccalaureate is growing because of its global, non-Eurocentric curriculum.

- **School-based credit** is both more varied and less visible. In its best-known version called “concurrent enrollment,” courses are taught by high school teachers in high school classrooms under the guidance of college professors. The extent of this phenomenon is reflected by the establishment of the National Association of Concurrent Enrollment Programs (NACEP), now in its fourth year. The NACEP has its own standards and guidelines and runs several national meetings each year ([www.nacep.org](http://www.nacep.org)). Earning college credit in their own high schools is especially appealing to rural students because courses are taught by their own high school teachers (or on occasion, by a college professor who travels to teach them) in a familiar setting.

- **College-based credit** is known most familiarly as “dual enrollment.” Students take college courses on a college campus or satellite center and are taught by college faculty, but remain formally enrolled in high school. Dual enrollment can also embrace college-credit courses taught on high school campuses by virtually anyone. Indeed, the commonly applied term “postsecondary options program,” tends to apply to all of these permutations taken together.

- **Virtual-college credit courses** are available to home schoolers, high school students, and youth who have left



school and are delivered through distance education. Many of these require fees, but nonetheless the array of offerings is growing.

Sometimes, all four of these options are available to high school students and some states provide incentives for earning college credit in any of these ways. Utah, for example, pays 75 percent of the tuition cost of two upper-division years of public postsecondary education if students graduate from high school with an associate degree.

### UNDERREPRESENTED STUDENTS AND POSTSECONDARY OPTIONS: WHAT LITTLE WE KNOW

The mere existence of these options doesn't necessarily spell success. We need to ask whether *underrepresented* students are increasingly earning college credits in high school. The answer, as far as we can tell, is yes and no. In one of the few areas for which reliable statistics are available, the number of high schools preparing students for AP exams grew from 9,786 in 1990-1991 to 14,157 in 2001-2002—although the proportion of African American (4 percent) and Hispanics (9 percent) students taking the test has been flat since 1994. The problem here is that minority students are often concentrated in the 40 percent of schools that do not offer AP or they are excluded from AP classes because they are not considered adequately prepared (*Education Week*, August 7, 2002).

Yet achievement levels frequently rise when schools with large numbers of underrepresented students offer AP courses and tests according to Jay Mathews, the *Washington Post* education reporter who wrote *Escalante: The Best Teacher in America*. Clifford Adelman's research at the U.S. Department of Education supports this conclusion.

Adelman found that the best predictor of college completion was not how good students' high school grades or SAT scores were, but how difficult their high school courses were. The harder the courses, the better they did in college and this was particularly true for minority students (see Adelman in Resources).

To buttress his argument that those students who are currently excluded from AP would most benefit from what he calls "a blast of collegiate learning," Mathews tracked the growth in AP courses school-by-school across the country, with a particular interest in those schools with high percentages of students eligible for a lunch subsidy.

A telling example was in Fairfax County, Virginia, where high schools opened *all* honors and AP courses to anyone who wanted to take them and required every student taking these courses to take the AP exams at the school's expense (see Mathews in Resources). The number of AP tests taken doubled in one year. And while the initial pass rate dropped from 75

percent to 61 percent, it is now stable at about 65 percent, with more tests being taken than ever. This compares quite closely to the national pass rate in 2002 of about 63 percent.

Some states and districts are using AP as a way to convince underrepresented students that they are college material and allow them to earn college credits by means of this "gold-standard" test. Among many examples of this approach is the Dana Center at the University of Texas, which sponsors the AP Equity Initiative to increase equity and access to advanced courses in high schools. The center will soon release a study of nine high-poverty high schools in three large districts in Texas that have above-average percentages of 11th- and 12th-grade students enrolled in AP calculus.

If underrepresented students are increasingly taking advantage of AP to accelerate their learning and to signal their readiness for college, the same is likely true for dual-enrollment and other postsecondary option programs. But few states keep adequate data on these programs. We know that dual enrollment programs have grown steadily in number over the last several years. They have also attracted considerable interest from policymakers.

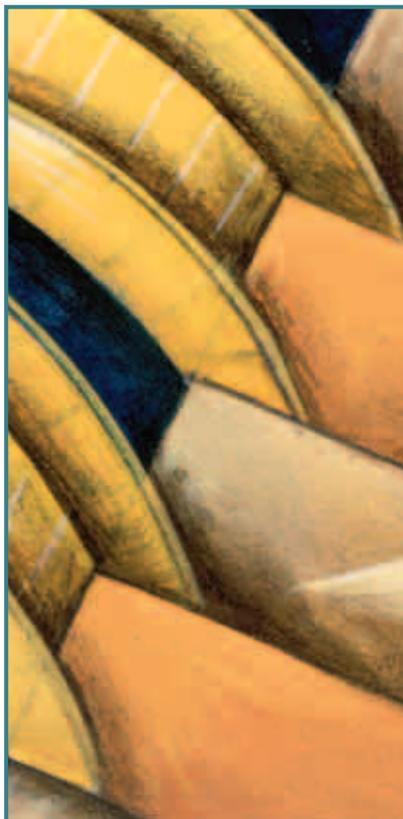
The Education Commission of the States (ECS), the National Conference of State Legislators (NCSL), the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AACU), the Community College Research Center at Columbia University, and the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (NCPHPE) have all issued reports on the topic.

Most of these advocate dual enrollment as a strategy for promoting college access and completion for a wider range of students. For example, in *The Open Door...Assessing the Promise and Problems of Dual Enrollment*, the AASCU cites a number of benefits for various

stakeholders: for students—better preparation for college; for institutions—lower remediation costs and higher retention; and for high schools—improved understanding of the demands of college and an expanded set of curricular offerings.

Nearly every state now has some form of a dual-enrollment initiative and 21 states provide incentives to increase student and institutional participation. While the largest dual enrollments are currently in community colleges, some four-year public institutions also participate (although not many flagships). Several large programs have grown very rapidly. In 1999-2000, for instance, about 20 percent or 12,000 Minnesota high school seniors took advantage of the Postsecondary Enrollment Options Program, which was created in 1985.

Increasing by about 3 percent per year from its establishment in 1990, Washington's Running Start program had a total of 13,669 high school students taking free courses at the state's 34 state community and technical colleges, as well as at several universities.



“College Now” in New York City was created by agreement between the City University of New York (CUNY) and the New York City Public School System in 1984. When CUNY imposed more stringent entrance requirements in 2000, College Now was seen as a strategy to better prepare students for admission and the program grew from six to 17 schools. It now includes a pilot for ninth graders and expects to serve 45,000 students in 2002-2003.

In Arizona, 11,000 students took dual enrollment classes. Dual enrollment in the Florida Community College System experienced an 82 percent cumulative increase between 1992 and 2001. And at Salt Lake City Community College, some 8,000 of the institution’s 18,450 enrollees were taking college-level courses at their high schools.

Legislation creating dual-enrollment programs is sometimes explicit about the notion of introducing students to college work at an earlier point, based on demonstrated performance instead of classroom time. Such legislation also cites a goal of reducing the costs of post-secondary education to families and the state. An auditor’s report on the Minnesota State College and University System’s (MnSCU) Postsecondary Enrollment Options Program, for example, recommends making such options more widely available and explicitly cites the promise of such programs for at-risk students (see Resources).

## EXPANDING THE TERRAIN

The most interesting evidence that higher education is in fact changing and that there is a new terrain emerging between high school and college may be in what Jobs for the Future, the non-profit organization where I work, calls “blended” institutions. These institutional forms are new structural entities that go substantially beyond alternatives like AP and dual enrollment in allowing students the chance to get a head start on college. While AP and dual enrollment give students a taste of college, their patterns of course taking are often incoherent and de-contextualized—consisting of a course here and a course there—rather than comprising an intentional program of collegiate study.

Students also get a taste of college in these “blended” institutions but their high school and college experiences are consciously integrated, both intellectually and socially. The curriculum is designed as a unit with high school and college-level work seamlessly melded into a single academic program.

In addition, because college is both free and part of high school, these schools allow young people to focus on their studies in their last years of high school rather than be distracted by the daunting maze of college and financial aid applications.

The longest-lived blended institutions are called “middle colleges,” which are high schools located on, or adjacent to, community colleges. Students graduate from such institutions with some college credits. At middle colleges, the “power of

the site” is the key to eliciting adult behaviors and a serious investment in learning from adolescents who are frequently at risk of high school failure.

The 30 middle colleges in the Middle College High School National Consortium are explicitly designed to serve at-risk youth by improving the transition from high school to college and by increasing student motivation to engage in rigorous academic work early in their school careers. Of the 4,500 students enrolled in consortium schools in 1999-2000, 41 percent took college classes and achieved a 97 percent pass rate. The two best-known middle colleges—both located on the campus of LaGuardia Community College—have achieved excellent results with newcomers to the United States and with students who face severe challenges in completing high school.

The newest form of blended institution focuses on underrepresented students is the Early College High School. Like middle colleges, these are small, autonomous institutions that offer college-level work, but they extend the concept further. Students in Early College High Schools actually earn an associate degree or two years of college credit toward a degree while in high school, not just *some* college credit.

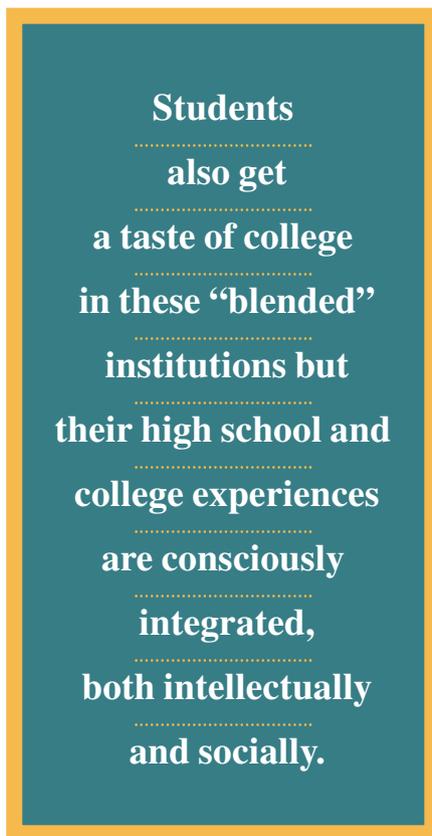
Four such schools have a several-year history of working toward the early college high school model including: Portland Community College Prep in Portland, Oregon; Okaloosa-Walton Charter School in Niceville, Florida; Washtenaw Technical Middle College in Ann Arbor, Michigan; and Bard High School Early College in New York City.

Within the Middle College Consortium, moreover, a number of member institutions are converting to early college high schools. In the next five years, at least 150 new early college high schools will appear throughout the country through an initiative coordinated by Jobs for the Future and funded by the Bill &

Melinda Gates Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation, the Ford Foundation, and the W. K. Kellogg Foundation.

Early college high schools have a bold purpose and design. They aim to make higher education more accessible, affordable, and attractive to students from all backgrounds by bridging the divide between high school and college in a common physical setting. Among their goals are to eliminate time wasted on non-essential courses and activities during the junior and senior years of high school, and to provide students with appropriate adult guidance and support through their first two years of college. The bottom line for the initiative is to increase opportunities to attain a bachelor’s degree by boosting the number of first-generation, low-income learners, and students of color attaining an associate degree or two years of college credit before leaving high school.

Building on experience with the many options for earning college credit in high school described above, early college high schools have the potential to unify and reconceptualize



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the entire body of academic work from ninth grade through the second year of college.

Even during their first year of implementation, these schools have challenged the divided structures of our current secondary/postsecondary education systems by raising important issues about funding across levels and jurisdictions, how credits should be awarded, faculty credentials, and the compatibility (or lack thereof) of accountability systems that span high school and postsecondary education.

They have also elicited considerable interest from state-level education policymakers at a time when the press for high achievement is colliding with severe economic constraints and when there is an even greater imperative for investments in human capital to accelerate the entry of capable young people into the labor market.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION AND POLICYMAKERS

The emergence of these many alternatives for students to earn college credit while enrolled in high school has important implications for action. The most immediate is the need to gather more information about the characteristics of students who participate in these programs and their levels of achievement to supplement the tentative positive outcomes already reported. Early data suggest that dual enrollment students earn higher grades in college than those who have not experienced a dual enrollment program and that these students are retained at higher rates. But we need much more data to sustain these conclusions.

A second area of research should address equity of access to such programs. Even though underrepresented students are taking greater advantage of postsecondary options while enrolled in high school, these benefits remain unevenly distributed. Many underrepresented students are shut out of participation in such programs by the lack of rigorous curricula at the high schools they attend, lack of information about the many options for earning college credit that are currently available, and by substantial fees for participation in some states. We need to know far more systematically than we now do what the barriers are for these students, and how they can be overcome.

A third area for policy research should address the specific obstacles to implementing educational options that span the border between high school and college. Such research should address two compelling and fundamental policy questions:

First, should the country underwrite an entitlement for its citizens to obtain education through the minimum level that has proven to be required for success in today's world: an associate degree or two years of postsecondary education? If postsecondary credentials are needed to succeed in the current labor market, wouldn't it be smart for both citizens and employers to support the full preparation of all our citizens for middle-class jobs?

And second, do we need entirely new institutions designed to serve the needs of late adolescents between grades nine and 14? High school students in most states can frequently pass high school exit exams in the 10th grade. Meanwhile, specialization begins at the junior year in college and continues through the master's degree. Institutions designed to address this empty territory might look more like what is evolving in the European community where the end of a general or technical education occurs at about age 19, followed by a three-year baccalaureate and, if applicable, a two-year master's.

Exploring the implications of these two questions is beyond the scope of this article. But if we are serious about creating a seamless system of education for all students through what now constitutes the first two years of postsecondary education, they are certainly worth pondering. □