

The Early College Challenge

Navigating Disadvantaged Students' Transition to College



BY JAMES E. ROSENBAUM AND
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In her senior year of high school, the low-income student with the C-minus average—the one who almost dropped out—is not only looking forward to graduation, but plans to attend college. Her college counselor, her teachers, her parents, and her peers have all told her that a college degree will land her a good-paying job.

No one has told her that she must pass a college placement test before she can take college classes. No one has told her that if she fails, she must pay for remedial courses for which she will receive

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no credit. No one has told her that she probably lacks the academic preparation to do well in remedial courses, much less college courses. No one has told her that most students like her never earn a college degree.

What if, instead of hoping poorly prepared students will catch up in college, we supported them in taking rigorous courses—even college-level courses—before they graduate from high school? What if, instead of lamenting the fact that many students struggle in transitioning from high school to college, our high school and college educators worked together to create a clear path from high school graduation to college graduation? What if:

1. Instead of relying on student choice, those educators showed students what content and skills they need for college and provided a *package-deal curriculum* leading to mastery of that content and those skills?
2. Instead of assuming students are motivated, those educators *fostered motivation* by offering incentives and bolstering students' confidence?

3. Instead of student-initiated guidance, those educators *kept students on track* by providing frequent mandatory guidance and closely monitoring students' progress?
4. Instead of a student-initiated college search, those educators *managed the transition* from high school to college?
5. Instead of assuming study skills, those educators explicitly *taught study skills*?

More—possibly millions more—of our students would beat the odds.

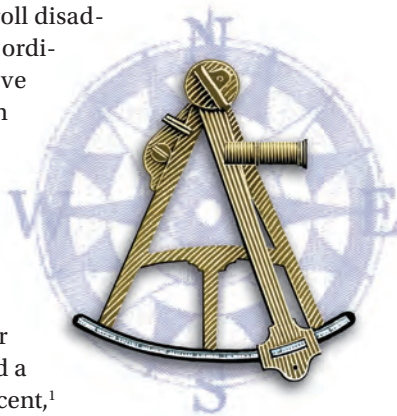
Successful early college high schools (ECHSs), which are formed through partnerships between high schools and colleges (usually community colleges), do all these things. Think of it as preparation through acceleration. ECHSs enroll disadvantaged students who have not excelled with ordinary grade-level academic content and have them take college courses while still in high school. It is not easy—and it does not always work. But successful ECHSs support their students in the five ways listed above, and their results are impressive.

While studies of these schools' long-term outcomes don't meet "gold standard" criteria for research methods,* they are encouraging. For the class of 2008, one study of 22 ECHSs found a four-year high school graduation rate of 92 percent,¹ which is high compared with the national rate for all high schools of about 70 percent² (and very high compared with the rates of 40 to 60 percent that are typical of high schools with lots of at-risk students). A recent study of 64 ECHSs that had been open for at least four years found that, of the 3,000 students who graduated in 2009, 44 percent earned at least one year of transferable college credit, while 25 percent earned two years of college credit or an associate's degree.³ Immediately after high school graduation, 86 percent enrolled in postsecondary education. ECHS advocates note that "compared with national averages, a higher percentage of ECHS students are students of color and from low-income families—which makes these college-going rates even more striking."⁴ Finally, in the one experimental study we could find, early results show that freshmen in ECHSs were more likely to be on track to attend college, had better attendance, and reported that they were more engaged in school than students in the control group.⁵

The fact that some ECHSs have produced strong results, while many traditional high schools struggle to help at-risk students achieve grade-level standards (much less college-level standards), is impressive. What's more remarkable is that ECHSs mostly work with community colleges, institutions where many regular college-age and adult students don't succeed; less than half of students entering community colleges earn any degree.⁶

Wanting to know how successful ECHSs worked with students who usually flounder, we culled the ECHS research for any indications of key elements. We also compared procedures

in exemplary ECHSs with those in exemplary two-year colleges (which enroll many at-risk high school graduates), including some private occupational colleges that have focused on supporting disadvantaged youth.[†] We tried to understand what ECHS procedures might explain their unexpected successes and what those procedures suggest about problems with the regular high school-to-college transition. We have already outlined the five ways that successful ECHSs resemble exemplary two-year colleges and differ from typical high schools. Before discussing them in detail, it is worth emphasizing that these lessons learned do not translate into a silver bullet. While the ECHS model has consistently attracted significant media



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attention, we wish to move beyond the hype that sometimes surrounds these schools. Like other education reforms, ECHSs have often been presented as a sure-fire way to boost student achievement. After all, these schools seem to offer a simple solution: just incorporate college courses into high school. However, by taking a close look at each of the five features of successful ECHSs, we will show how the reality of these schools is much more complex.

1. Instead of relying on student choice, ECHSs show students what content and skills they need for college and provide a package-deal curriculum that leads to mastery of that content and those skills.

Most high schools in the United States offer abundant options and only minimal requirements. Students may choose easy courses, unaware of the disadvantages, because no one informs them that harder courses pay off in college preparation. As a result, far too many students' high school coursework is poorly coordinated with college standards. In contrast, Japan and Finland, which produce some of the highest-achieving students in the world, have well-integrated curricula based on consistent standards across schools, and between high schools and university entrance

[†]There are two main approaches to inferring the essential elements of a program. One is to rely on participants' and/or researchers' impressions of what elements have an impact. Participants can report interactions that solve problems as they arise, while researchers can observe several sites or classrooms implementing a program to tabulate success and failure rates associated with different procedures, and perhaps contrast them with settings that lack similar procedures. The other approach is to examine research on related programs and discover what kinds of problems arise and how they are addressed. If different programs successfully use procedures with similar elements, they may help us see underlying processes explaining their effectiveness. The fact that these are different programs provides some perspective on the general features that are effective. For this paper, we have used both approaches.

*In brief, the "gold standard" for research methods requires random sample selection, random assignment to treatment and control groups, pretesting to ensure initial group equivalence, posttesting to look for treatment effects, and minimal attrition between pre- and posttesting. For a more detailed discussion, see the explanation of randomized controlled trials in *Identifying and Implementing Educational Practices Supported by Rigorous Evidence: A User Friendly Guide*, available at www2.ed.gov/rschstat/research/pubs/rigoroussevid/rigoroussevid.pdf.

exams. In the United States, school reform movements often point to the creation of “high standards” or “college-ready standards” as important components in improving student achievement and degree completion. But these many disjointed reform movements are not coordinated, and they have not led to coordination between high schools and colleges.

While recognizing the importance of setting high standards, we find the strategy to be nothing more than a first step. Standards alone are much too vague. Students need specific information about college requirements and how to reach them. The research and reports on ECHSs indicate that they use three specific procedures: having students take college placement exams early in high school, developing clear curricular pathways aligned with college-level coursework, and providing teacher professional development for implementing high standards. We will address each of these points.

a. College placement exams early in high school

Many ECHSs create consistent, visible standards by giving students college placement exams early in high school and focusing the high school curriculum on continual improvement on these tests. In some ECHSs, such as the Dayton Early College Academy in Ohio, students take a college placement exam in ninth grade, and many other ECHSs require it during tenth or eleventh grade.

This is in stark contrast to the typical student experience. For many entering college students, the placement exam is a surprise. Research shows that many community college students do not know a placement test will be required, and even among those who know, some don’t know how they should prepare or what is at stake.⁷ Furthermore, other research shows that, after receiving their placement test scores, first-year college students often are surprised to find out that they are unprepared for college coursework.⁸ Unfortunately, many students only understand these exams after it is too late to prepare. Indeed, states contribute to this confusion. Many states require high school exit exams, but set pass levels so low that they mislead students. Many students are surprised when, three months after passing the state exam for “high school competency,” they fail a test for “college readiness.”⁹

Nationally, over 60 percent of entering community college students must enroll in remedial coursework, and in some urban areas, the rates exceed 90 percent.¹⁰ Because remedial placements create unexpected increases in college costs (both in time and money), college completion rates are much lower for students taking several remedial courses.¹¹

Many ECHSs avoid placement test surprises by testing students early. Because exams are given prior to senior year, students have opportunities to

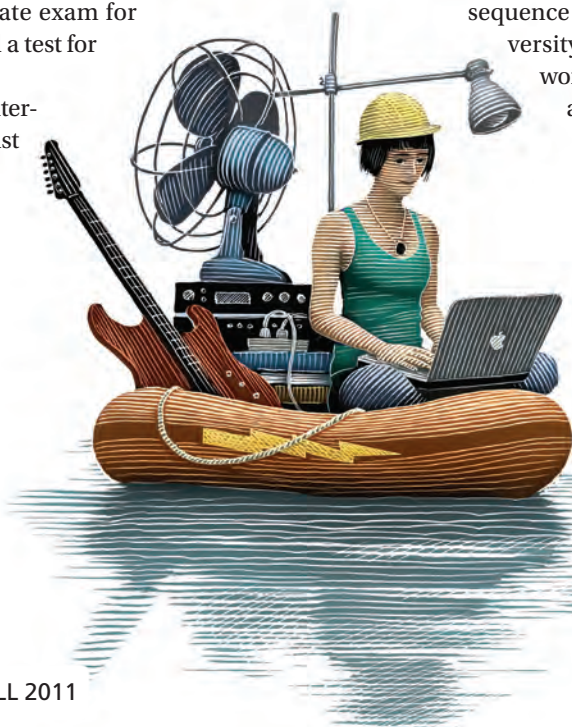
understand the test, their own skill level, and what they need to do to pass. Furthermore, while low placement test scores indicate a “failure” when the test is given at the beginning of college, low scores among high school students are not stigmatized because high school students are not expected to have attained college-level standards. The placement test indicates what skills students need to master in the near future. Other reformers have proposed using early testing in this way so students are prepared before they get to college.¹² However, those reformers have usually focused on testing students at the end of eleventh grade or even later, and they use the test to add isolated lessons, not to shape the high school curriculum. Successful ECHSs use the placement test to make the college standards visible from the start, thereby posing clear, consistent goals throughout high school.

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b. Clear curricular pathways aligned with college-level coursework

Pathways to College Access and Success,¹³ a report published by the U.S. Department of Education, contends that “the primary component of an ideal curriculum would be the presence of a clear curricular pathway encompassing high school and developmental course work, aligned with the demands of college course work, and culminating in student enrollment in a college course.” It argues that best practices stress that curriculum be transparent so that students understand what they need to do.

The most effective ECHSs create a clear set of courses that lead to a college-level curriculum. They help students understand from the beginning of high school where they are in the course sequence and what they need to do next. A City University of New York (CUNY) administrator who works with a partner ECHS states, “Our students are actually planning for college-level coursework from their first day in the [high] school.... And their teachers plan backwards from college, to make sure they’ll know what they need to be successful in college-level classes.”¹⁴ ECHS counselors explain the curriculum and at what point students can enroll in college courses. Thus, students are aware that they are being assessed on college standards so that they can complete college-level coursework while in high school. Overall, ECHSs provide clear routes so that students better understand the path to college-level curriculum.



c. Teacher professional development for implementing standards

Previous research with college students has shown that when students struggle in college-level classes, it is usually because they are not used to the accelerated pace of the curriculum and are not prepared for the writing and critical thinking necessary to succeed at that level.¹⁵ In particular, there is a large disconnect between the minimal writing instruction in high school and the lengthy writing requirements in college.¹⁶ For example, the National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges¹⁷ found that about 75 percent of high school students never received a writing assignment in social science or history, whereas those courses in college require large amounts of writing.¹⁸ To address this problem, courses need to be better aligned through collaboration between high school and college faculty.¹⁹ Because more than half

curriculum, adapting materials, and sharing teaching methods.²² At Georgia College Early College, teachers have one hour of common planning time per day and additional time on Fridays while students participate in college preparation activities.²³ This provides time for high school and college faculty to confer about new ideas and gain insight into what has worked in other classrooms.

In some ECHSs, high school teachers and college professors “team teach.” At International High School, located at CUNY’s LaGuardia Community College in New York City, high school and college faculty design courses to be taught together.²⁴ Because team teaching requires a great deal of cooperation between the high school and college, it creates a dialogue and motivates both faculties to prepare students for college-level courses.

2. Instead of assuming students are motivated, ECHSs foster motivation by offering incentives and bolstering students’ confidence.

High school and college staff often assume that students’ motivation, or lack thereof, is a fixed attribute. Because they assume that students understand the payoffs of education, they conclude that students who do not exert themselves must lack personal motivation.

In contrast, exemplary two-year colleges and ECHSs believe that institutional measures that bolster incentives and students’ confidence can increase motivation. For example, many occupational colleges structure curriculum to confer early successes in the form of certificates and other credentials that do not take long to earn.²⁵

Similarly, in most high schools, nearly all students aspire to attend college, but the path is much less certain for disadvantaged students, who often doubt whether their college efforts will lead to success. Like the better occupational colleges, the better ECHSs attempt to identify the “institutional factors that create students’ negative attitudes, fears and inability to display their potential.”²⁶ ECHSs also aim to improve students’ confidence that their efforts in high school will pay off.²⁷ Typically, these students have not experienced much prior success in school. ECHSs help students develop “educational identities” by providing multiple incentives, frequent successes, and socialization opportunities.

In the ECHS literature, we find both formal and informal incentives. The formal incentives, like the time and money saved by earning college credit while in high school, are often touted as powerful motivators. ECHSs also offer informal incentives that we suspect may improve motivation as much or more than the formal ones. ECHSs give students autonomy and independence not found in traditional high schools. Unlike typical students, who are confined to the high school building, ECHS students can leave to attend college classes. And instead of being confined to a rigid time schedule for classes, as high school students typically are, ECHS students have more discretion over their time as they move between high school and college classes. They discover that in college, “there are no bells, no hall monitors, and no metal detectors.” Instead, “there are personal responsibility, trust, and encouragement.”²⁸



of ECHSs are located on college campuses, their proximity facilitates partnerships between faculties. Holding students to “high standards” can be abstract, but teachers in ECHSs and college faculty work together to clarify what content and skills students need for college-level work.

The proximity of ECHSs to college campuses also enables college faculty to “influence high school curriculum and content mastery.”²⁰ As a result, high school teachers learn how to adapt their materials or content to better reflect what is asked of students at the college level. At one ECHS, English high school teachers and college faculty share departmental office space. They learn from one another’s expertise and strategies, adapt materials as appropriate, and share teaching methods. While college faculty members are usually more knowledgeable in their discipline because they hold subject-area master’s degrees or doctorates, high school teachers usually have more expertise in pedagogical methods and evaluation.²¹ These areas of differential knowledge provide opportunities for sharing information about how to meet students’ needs. At some ECHSs, special professional development days are used specifically for aligning

Students also enjoy symbols of college status. For instance, at Georgia College Early College, ninth-graders receive college identification cards that give them access to college facilities (libraries, recreation facilities, and computer labs).²⁹ Research has noted that being on the college campus has “a powerful appeal for students, including its symbolic meaning as a sign of capability and adult trust.”³⁰ ECHSs give students added responsibility, discretion, and the perks of being a college student with the associated adult-like status.

More superficially, but perhaps no less important, many ECHSs allow discretion around personal appearance. Since they want students to feel more like college students, some ECHSs exempt students from high school dress codes—at least when they are on the college campus. While the literature on ECHSs does not describe these perks as incentives, we suspect that students see them as inducements to stay in the program.

Similar to procedures used in some occupational colleges,³¹ some ECHSs also increase motivation through cohorts. At Georgia College Early College, students are placed into “small learning communities” of three or four students at the beginning of their ECHS careers. These students share all the same classes, and the cohort provides social support, study groups, and positive role models for dealing with common problems.³² In an interview, one student mentioned that attending an ECHS was difficult but that having the support of peers was tremendously beneficial. He said, “We’re all united, and we’re going to support each other to be successful.... That’s the key to this program.”³³ Not every ECHS pays attention to developing cohorts, but the ones that do find that cohorts provide positive peer pressure so students feel encouraged and motivated.

Many ECHSs also increase confidence by reducing abrupt discontinuities. Instead of forcing students to face dramatically higher standards at entry, exemplary private occupational colleges adjust the initial demands to foster early success in classes. Similarly, many ECHSs boost student confidence by creating first experiences that lead to early success. The STAR (Science, Technology and Research) Early College School in Brooklyn, New York, eases the transition to high school with “low-risk introductory activities in the ninth and tenth grades, which aim to build confidence in students’ ability to succeed.”³⁴ This allows students to experience fewer doubts about meeting standards. Additionally, ECHS students often can pace themselves through the curriculum. For example, at Dayton Early College Academy, the school that requires entering ninth-graders to take a college placement test, students must go through a series of gateway proficiency tests to demonstrate their competency in an academic area, rather than complete a specific amount of time in each course. This series of tests lets students learn at their own pace and move to new goals when they are ready. It also prevents them from moving on before they are ready, as so many low-achieving

students in traditional schools do.

After students enter college-level courses, this incremental approach increases students’ confidence and their motivation to enter college. Students learn that they can handle college-level work, socialize with college students, and gain familiarity with the college system so they don’t fear it.³⁵ In particular, ECHS students are better prepared to become college students; they have more realistic, detailed, and nuanced conceptions of the role than peers in traditional schools, which makes the transition into the college environment a smoother one.³⁶

3. Instead of student-initiated guidance, ECHSs keep students on track by providing frequent mandatory guidance and closely monitoring students’ progress.

Most high schools and community colleges rely on student-initiated guidance, which leads to problems because students often don’t know they need guidance until their problems have become serious. In contrast, many occupational colleges and most ECHSs require frequent mandatory advisory sessions, and they closely monitor students’ progress. Usually, ECHS students have a weekly (and in some schools, daily) advisory period for academic and emotional counseling. About 84 percent of schools offer support courses that meet often “to ensure that at least one adult in the school had a handle on the academic and emotional needs of each student.”³⁷ The advisory, led by a counselor or a faculty member, provides a safe space for students to discuss school and home issues that might be affecting their academic performance. These sessions also give teachers an opportunity to recommend productive ways of handling situations and better behavior strategies. ECHSs refer to these courses as a safety net so that no students fall through the cracks.³⁸

Researchers have noted that combining academic and emotional counseling works better than a single focus on academics because problems are often intertwined;³⁹ advisories are a place for students to bring up personal issues that might affect their academic performance and progress, such as trying to study in a noisy home.⁴⁰

ECHSs vary in the ways that they monitor student progress, but they typically focus on early detection. At one ECHS, teachers regularly generate a list of students receiving Ds or Fs in their classes (as often as every week, in some cases). ECHSs also create various interventions to help students improve. These include required attendance at special study halls that provide extra tutoring with a teacher, and required meetings between parents and staff so that homework gets done on time. A study of over 150 ECHSs found that, in the 2007–2008 school year, 84 percent offered formal tutoring, with 16 percent requiring it of all students and 74 percent making it



mandatory for at least some.⁴¹ At one school, struggling students are required to attend extra academic support meetings supervised by a teacher. Researchers found that students who were involved made significant gains; most did not have to continue after the next set of progress reports. Administrators suggest that the program works because it is more structured than general study halls and because it is mandatory for struggling students.⁴²

After students enter college classes, their performance continues to be closely monitored. Staff members in successful ECHSs regularly contact college professors and check college attendance records.⁴³ For example, the counselor at Contra Costa Middle College High School in San Pablo, California, meets with college faculty for monitoring the “progress of the high school students and sharing ideas for instructional strategies to help students succeed.”⁴⁴ At another ECHS, a high school staff person “checks with professors at the end of the third and eighth weeks of each semester and follows up with individual students.”⁴⁵ As a result, students and staff are aware of any problems early, and ECHS staff intervenes if needed. The timing of the intervention is particularly important; not only does early intervention increase the odds that a student can be helped to succeed, but if a college class turns out to be too challenging, students can withdraw before it shows up as a failure on their transcripts.⁴⁶

Unlike in traditional high schools, ECHS counselors have time to detect problems and refer students to resources. While community colleges typically have abysmal student-counselor ratios—often greater than 1,000 to 1—one study found that ECHSs had between 125 and 250 students per counselor.⁴⁷ This is much better than the national average⁴⁸ for all high schools of 457 to 1. Even better, the ECHS counselors focus primarily on student advising, unlike the typical high school counselor whose many other administrative duties distract from student advising. One ECHS counselor, for instance, reserves Monday mornings just to meet with students facing new crises over the weekend.⁴⁹ Moreover, in ECHSs, counselors are not the only advisers; teachers and administrators also staff advisory periods. By allowing counselors to focus on advising, and by supplementing their counseling function with other school staff, ECHSs keep students on track and quickly solve problems (academic or otherwise) before they become serious.

4. Instead of a student-initiated college search, ECHSs manage the transition from high school to college.

The typical high school-to-college transition is abrupt and unsupervised. Even among seniors admitted to four-year colleges, research has found that 20 percent do not show up at any college in the fall.⁵⁰ Of course, showing up is just the first step: research has identified many ways that students from traditional high schools have trouble with the transition, including being surprised by placement tests and not understanding remedial courses or the various types of degree programs and subsequent career options.⁵¹ In the typical high school-to-college transition, institutions often blame each other. No one takes responsibility for the huge numbers of students who want to earn a college degree but do not even complete a certificate.*

In contrast, effective ECHSs take responsibility. They create

the kindergarten through fourteenth-grade partnerships that many reformers argue would help with the problems of too much remedial coursework and too little college persistence.⁵² As we discussed above, ECHSs smooth this transition by ensuring that their coursework directly leads into college-level work. In addition, ECHS staff members closely monitor students as they enter college, meeting regularly with students and checking in with professors. Beyond this work, high-quality ECHSs also prepare students for graduating from high school and continuing their college educations.

While ECHS students take college classes in high school, they still must navigate the college admissions process if they choose to attend a different college after they graduate from high school. This can be difficult, especially for low-income and first-genera-

While fragmented curricula, too many course offerings, and uneven teaching quality characterize most high schools, the better early college high schools use college placement tests to coordinate curricula and teaching methods across classrooms.

tion college students who usually have little help from home. Assisting these students in executing a plan for college admissions and attendance is crucial.⁵³ A survey in the 2007–2008 school year found that 63 percent of ECHSs provided preparation for college entrance exams (ACT and SAT), and approximately 75 percent of ECHSs offered college tours and scholarship information sessions.⁵⁴ Additionally, many of the partner colleges and universities require a complete college application before the student can enroll in college-level courses. As a result, ECHS staff members guide students through what can be an intimidating and challenging application and registration process.⁵⁵

5. Instead of assuming that students have study skills, ECHSs explicitly teach study skills.

Study skills are essential for success in education, particularly postsecondary education;⁵⁶ however, most schools in the United States do not explicitly teach them. In contrast, Japanese schools teach study skills and simple habits that improve school performance and make schoolwork easier.⁵⁷ While research suggests that these skills are taught in some suburban high schools,⁵⁸ schools serving students from academically disadvantaged backgrounds typically do not offer similar opportunities, although these students might benefit the most from learning such skills.

By comparison, almost 90 percent of ECHSs require that students take a specific course in order to learn the skills necessary

*To learn what traditional high schools can do to better prepare students for the transition to college, see “Beyond One-Size-Fits-All College Dreams: Alternative Pathways to Desirable Careers” in the Fall 2010 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/newspubs/periodicals/ae/fall2010/index.cfm.



for academic success.⁵⁹ The titles of these courses vary from “Study Skills” to “College 101,” but their aim remains the same: to give students the skills they need to manage their time well, be organized, and effectively study—skills that provide academic benefits across disciplines.

The timing and content of these courses varies. For example, in the STAR Early College School in Brooklyn, students take an intensive class at Brooklyn College in the summer prior to ninth grade that focuses on study skills, as well as English and mathematics. The class also introduces students to college departments and the college campus where the school is located.⁶⁰ In many ECHSs, these courses include “foundational capabilities,”⁶¹ which are primarily academic skills such as critical reading, logic, and analysis. Similarly, the Middle College High School at Southwest Tennessee Community College has a precollege course focused on helping students improve their verbal and writing skills in multiple subject areas.⁶² Other course objectives are to teach study skills, time management, and organizational skills (including how to use a planning book to plan for assignments and deadlines).

Other courses offered later in high school are designed to prepare students for their first college-level course. At many ECHSs, these classes focus on helping students prepare for college-level research and writing. Topics include library research, revising papers, understanding and avoiding plagiarism, taking notes in lectures, finding good mentoring in college, and managing a college-level workload.⁶³ Occasionally, these courses also cover orientation material so that students become acquainted with campus facilities, which are particularly important when the ECHS is not located near the campus.⁶⁴ Other courses include information on college searches and career choices.⁶⁵

Time management, organization, and academic skills benefit students across the curriculum and throughout their academic careers. One can’t help but wonder how students manage the high school-to-college transition when they attend schools that don’t offer such courses.

We’ve all seen the economic forecasts regarding the high-skill jobs of the future, and we know that higher education is crucial for virtually all youth. But the fact is, most high schools in the United States have enormous difficulties getting at-risk students to achieve grade-level standards, much less college-level standards. Some reformers seek quick and easy solutions while blaming teachers or students; ECHSs focus on devising organizational procedures for giving teachers and students the support they need.

ECHSs attempt a very ambitious goal; those that are succeeding deserve our attention. Even though ECHSs are able to motivate students with potential college credits, most of the strategies devised by ECHSs could be adopted by any high school. While fragmented curricula, far too many course offerings,⁶⁶ and uneven teaching quality characterize most high schools, the better ECHSs use the college goal and college placement tests to coordinate curricula and teaching methods across classrooms. They also provide additional time for teachers to plan and coordinate lessons, require study skills courses, and show students that they can complete college-level work. Knowing that most low-income students live in stressful environments, successful ECHSs provide frequent advising, support, and problem solving. In addition, ECHSs take responsibility for the high school-to-college transition.

Like other education reforms, ECHSs are often hyped as magical—powerful changes from simple and easy procedures. ECHSs seem to offer a simple solution: just incorporate college courses into high school. In fact, the reality of ECHSs is much more complex and much more promising. □

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Hidalgo Sets Sail

A School District Supports All Students in Earning College Credits



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BY THAD R. NODINE

When you fly over South Texas toward the Rio Grande Valley, the land stretches flat in a patchwork of rectangular shades of emerald. Here and there amid the fields you see the red or white rooftops of development, the zigzags of trailer parks, and the flat rooftops of apartment build-

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ings, warehouses, and shopping outlets. On ribbons of asphalt flanked by palms, trucks and cars seem to make slow headway. Between the fields, another cargo drifts even more leisurely, as water from the Rio Grande flows along a vast array of canals to bring productivity to the soil. All the sugarcane and citrus produced in the state comes from South Texas, which is also a large exporter of sorghum grain, cotton, and onions. As you look across the groves and fields toward the horizon, you might glimpse—beyond the stark border wall still being erected—the slow, gracious curves of the wide river itself, its water reflecting the vivid contours of sunset.

What you might miss in flying over so fast is a small city nestled in one of those broad curves of the Rio Grande. This border town, with its active international bridge, used to be the seat of government for Hidalgo County—and is still its namesake. Its quaint pumping-station museum and forested birding trails attract visitors,

as does the largest “killer bee” statue in the world. At 10 feet and 2,000 pounds, the statue commemorates the first swarm of Africanized honey bees found in the United States, which brought Hidalgo a flurry of sensational headlines when they were discovered near the town. But it’s not the distinguished museum or the upstart bee that is garnering state and national attention now. It’s the Hidalgo Independent School District, serving about 3,500 students, that is making heads turn.

In 2005, the district made an ambitious commitment. In partnership with nearby University of Texas-Pan American, the University of Texas System, the Communities Foundation of Texas/Texas High School Project, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the district promised that all of its students, not just a select



ILLUSTRATIONS BY SCOTT MCKOWEN

group, would earn college credits before graduating from high school. This commitment by a small district in South Texas could be seen as part of a nationwide pattern: many districts are engaged in high school reform efforts to improve the college readiness of students. Many are also actively supporting dual enrollment in college classes for motivated students. But Hidalgo appears to be the first comprehensive public school district in the United States to expect all students to earn college credits—including credits in career-focused college programs—while in high school. The demographics of Hidalgo's student body—99 percent Hispanic, 89 percent economically disadvantaged, and 53 percent English language learner—make this commitment even more remarkable.*

Since 2005, the district's efforts have transformed its elementary and middle schools as well as its high school.[†] The district has driven college expectations, more rigorous course sequencing, and student support systems into all of its schools, with the goal of preparing students and their families for college readiness by the time students reach high school.

At the high school, the district increased the rigor of its courses and aligned them with actual college courses that it began providing at the school and at partnering colleges. For students who may not want to obtain a four-year degree, the district created career pathways, with articulated courses that can lead to professional certificates at local community and technical colleges. As students and their families struggled to meet the higher expectations, the high school expanded and added support systems, including a summer session that prepares students for the Texas Higher Education Assessment (which determines if students are ready for college-level work, be they high school students entering dual-enrollment programs or college freshmen) and a parental



The district has driven college expectations, more rigorous courses, and student supports into all of its schools, with the goal of college readiness by high school.

program that engages family and community stakeholders around developing college-ready students. Meanwhile, the district advanced the education of its teachers through incentives for gaining master's degrees and adjunct status from postsecondary partners. The district also worked closely with the Communities Foundation of Texas/Texas High School Project to learn the ins and outs of pertinent state regulations and financing in order to smooth college access and success for students.

The story of how this district took up the mantle of providing college credits for all its students—and how students and families responded—says a lot about the priorities of “this little treasure on the border,” as the district has become known.

Becoming an Early College District

In the late 1980s, the Hidalgo Independent School District ranked in the bottom 10 percent of Texas districts in student achievement. But during the next two

decades, Hidalgo's leaders took a series of steps that improved student performance and gained support throughout the community. Chief among these transformations were efforts to focus everyone—from bus drivers to principals and from teachers to school board members—on doing what it takes to raise student achievement. This included shifting the board to be more open to innovation and change. It also featured efforts to get principals, assistant principals, and teachers working together in teams to improve instruction and curriculum.

When Dr. Daniel P. King became superintendent in 1999, one of his most visible early actions was to require students to wear uniforms. The decision was made in order to end discipline problems associated with gang colors, put all students on an equal footing, and develop a positive and inclusive school identity.

King also instituted programs to improve curriculum and instruction. During his tenure, a dual-language program was developed to build on the linguistic strength of Hidalgo's students (85 percent of whom speak Spanish at home); more Advanced Placement (AP) and other rigorous courses were offered, and more students were encouraged to take them; and dual-enrollment offerings were expanded with local colleges. In addition, the district created stronger career pathways for students and a teacher internship program with local businesses.

In 2005, King was approached by the president of UT-Pan American, and later by the University of Texas System and the Communities Foundation of Texas/Texas High School Project, to consider creating an early college high school in the district. He and his team were attracted by the early college concept because they realized it could bring a unifying vision and structure to efforts under way at the district. “We were already committed to innovation and reform and to college for every student,” he said.

Although the goals and student profile for the early college concept fit Hidalgo's needs, there was one major obstacle: early college programs had not been developed to serve all students throughout a district. Across the country, early college schools included standalone high schools, schools within larger high schools, and schools located on college campuses—but all these

*For more on Hidalgo's student body, see the Texas Education Agency's Education at a Glance: School District Summary, Hidalgo, January 2011, <http://loving1.tea.state.tx.us/onestar/Reports/Summary2010/District/AAG1-DIST-SchoolDist-PDF-en-us-108905.pdf>.

[†]The district has one traditional high school, Hidalgo Early College High School, and one small alternative high school, Hidalgo Academy.

models used a small-schools approach, with about 100 students per grade and about 400 students total in each school. The Hidalgo school district includes four elementary schools that feed into one junior high school and then into Hidalgo High School, which has about 900 students. The traditional early college model meant that more than half of the high school would be left out. “My concept has always been to focus on all the kids,” King said.

The funding guidelines from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation clearly called for a small-schools approach, but the foundation eventually approved the proposal. “If we want to really transform schools, this is an opportunity to do that,” King said. “Basically, that got the green light.”

As the district and its postsecondary partner, UT-Pan American, began implementing a district-wide early college approach, they borrowed from strategies adopted at other early college schools—for example, in working to align application and registration processes, scheduling, course requirements, textbooks, and assessments. But many challenges were unique to Hidalgo due to its emphasis on early college for *all students*. In facing these challenges, Hidalgo’s history of teamwork and innovation became a real asset. For example, the district and UT-Pan American quickly realized that they needed to expand postsecondary options for those students who were not interested in pursuing four-year degrees. As a result, the district strengthened career and technical pathways: they reached out to South Texas College and Texas State Technical College to provide students with articulated courses that lead to certificates at these institutions. The district also benefited from the ongoing guidance of Communities Foundation of Texas/Texas High School Project, which played an important role in building the partnerships and ensuring good communication between the stakeholders.

Edward Blaha, who was the principal at Hidalgo High School when the early college program started and then was the superintendent from 2009 to 2011, said that strengthening the career pathways was crucial to meeting the needs of Hidalgo’s students. “You have to know your community and your kids,” he said. “One size does not fit all.... What we originally thought we would do is not exactly what we did,



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL STRAVATO / © 2010 JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

because we learned along the path. We learned together.”

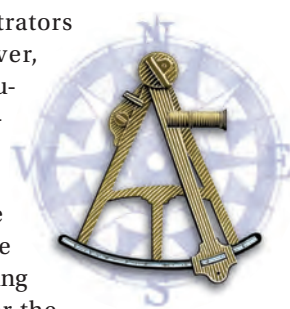
The first group of freshmen inducted into the early college program graduated on June 4, 2010. By their high school graduation, these students had achieved a remarkable 3,743 college credit hours. At the ceremony, Dr. Ana Maria Rodriguez, then the interim provost of UT-Pan American, handed out certificates of college hours to more than 95 percent of the class—to the thunderous applause, proud grins, and many tears of parents, family, friends, teachers, administrators, the school board, and plenty of business and other community members.* Individual college credit hours ranged from 1 to 75, and two-thirds of the students earned at least a semester of credit. Robert Ruiz, who graduated with 59 college credits, said that before graduation his proudest accomplishment was passing his first college class, which was chemistry. “If I could do that,” he said, “I knew I could pass any college class.” He said that “many people fear college. They think it’s going to be a completely different level and that you’re not going to be able to do it. We learned that we can do it.”

*Some special education students were not able to earn college credits. However, many special education students do earn college credits. Of the 52 high school students in special education in the 2009–2010 school year, 24 earned college credits.

Hidalgo’s administrators and teachers, however, emphasized that in graduating their first early college class, their work has only begun. For example, Blaha noted that the district has expanded the number of students taking SAT and ACT tests; for the class of 2009, 86 percent of Hidalgo’s students took the SAT or the ACT, compared with 62 percent statewide.[§] Now the district is working to improve the test scores, which still lag behind the state’s scores, partly because so many students are tested. “The starting line is right behind our heels,” he said. “That’s as far as we’ve gone right now. There’s miles to go, but we know we’ve stepped onto the right track, because this is good for kids.”

Creating a College-Going Culture

When the district adopted an early college model in 2005, district leaders were enthusiastic about focusing on college readiness and success, including developing more rigorous and accelerated instruction and



[§]Texas Education Agency, “2009–2010 Academic Excellence Indicator System, District Reports: PDF, Hidalgo,” section I, page 13, report generated on June 23, 2011, through <http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis/2010/district.srch.html>.

designing comprehensive supports for students. In addition, they believed that for these innovations to succeed, students and their parents needed to fully embrace college-going as a given. The district and its college partners immediately took steps to instill a strong college-going culture among students, parents, teachers, and the broader community. Initially, these efforts focused on the high school level, but they now reach all the way to preschool.

Many families with children in Hidalgo live in *colonias* at the edges of agricultural fields, where rows of sub-standard housing were erected long ago without regard to building codes. Many of these families cannot afford computers, or sometimes even paper and pencils. But they pride themselves on, and have passed bonds to support, the district's educational facilities. With this community backing, Hidalgo's four elementary schools are well tended: clipped grass and clean sidewalks outside, and wide hallways with bright posters and banners along the walls inside.

For example, Salinas Elementary School, which serves students in prekindergarten through fifth grade, has colorful pictures of children in school uniforms taped around big letters spelling out "College and Career Readiness: Our Future Begins Today." There's a poster about college awareness on a table, and one about career awareness, too, with pictures of children and families. On the way to the cafeteria, there's a long string of college and university banners, both in-state—University of North Texas, UT-Austin, Texas A&M—and far away—Harvard, Yale, Stanford, Notre Dame, North Carolina, Michigan, Colorado. Each of the 24 classrooms at the school adopts a university that the class researches. The students write to the institutions for information, as well as for free pens, pencils, erasers, notebooks, and other items with college logos. They also receive free college T-shirts, provided either by the institution or the school, and on selected days, the students



Junior high and high school teachers worked to “backwards map” curricular requirements so students would be prepared to take college courses by their junior year.

get to wear their T-shirts instead of their school uniforms.

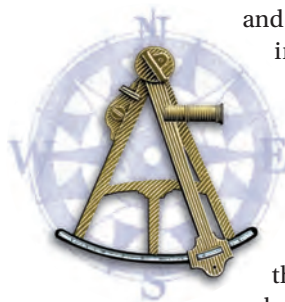
Salinas is not just encouraging students, it's preparing them too. In late fall, teachers give a survey in Spanish to parents about their habits with their children at home—concerning reading, communication, and other healthy behaviors. “By the time they reach the first grade,” said Silverio Macias, principal of Salinas Elementary, “they have a real academic idea of what they should be doing with their child.” During meetings with parents, teachers emphasize the importance of having a well-lit place—a desk, a corner, a lamp—that the family sets aside for homework, as well as other habits that build college success. The school also has ramped up and given a special name, “Building Scholars,” to its tutoring program in literacy and writing that helps kids reach proficiency. College representatives come to the schools for assemblies, including a recent “blow-up planetarium” in a gym where the kids got to walk in, look at the stars, and ask questions of college professors. The emphasis is not high school graduation; it's college and career. According to Macias, this has changed attitudes: “In Spanish we say, ‘Cumplir.’ In English it means, ‘Finish what you start.’ The idea is

that's what we need to do: instill into our children that they are in power. It's inside of them. It's like saying, ‘You're a doctor. Realize yourself.’”

Ida Diaz Junior High, which serves all of the sixth- through eighth-graders in the district, is likewise focused on creating a shift so that postsecondary education—with all of its options, from training programs to the pursuit of advanced degrees—becomes the norm. This emphasis is tangible in the appearance of the school and in the structure of its programs. College banners and information about careers are posted everywhere: in hallways, on doors, in the cafeteria, at the gym. Each grade level is clustered into two teams of teachers, and each of the six teams is associated with a university, such as Baylor or UT-San Antonio. Students wear their college shirts on Fridays and participate in college-themed pep rallies regularly.

The school organizes trips to colleges to help students get a sense of the academic culture of higher education. These trips are not generic tours; they focus on subject areas or departments and include contacts with professors. The school recently took 50 students to Texas A&M at Kingsville to visit the engineering department and watch a robotic competition. “Now they want to compete next year,” said Olivia Hernandez, the school principal. The school bused 60 students to a science and career fair at nearby South Texas College. “We were the only junior high school there,” Hernandez said. “The rest were college and high school kids.”

All junior high students are expected to identify at least one area of academic interest and prepare to take pre-AP courses in that subject. The junior high has developed active TexPrep partnerships for students who show interest in STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). The program includes more than 60 students who are bused to South Texas College, Texas State Technical College, or UT-Pan American to participate in science labs and classes in computer science, logic, and physics. The classes on campus are once a month during the school year and five days per week in the summer, providing these young students with hands-on



experience with college academics.

As another way to emphasize the connections between college and career, all eighth-graders take a course focusing on career pathways. By the end of the year, they meet with counselors to begin filling out education plans for high school, including college courses they expect to take. Students are encouraged to select one of five career pathways offered by the high school: business and marketing; industrial and engineering technology; health science and technology; human development management and services; and personal and protective services. Counselors also meet with parents to explain the high school's handbook of classes, which resembles the catalogs that colleges provide, with course descriptions and pathways leading toward specialties.

As at the elementary and junior high schools, college and career information is displayed throughout the Hidalgo High School campus. Near the main entry, a large poster shows a high school student, in a lab coat and protective glasses, examining a test tube in a college chemistry lab. A big bulletin board asks, "Are You Ready for College?" and information is posted about testing dates, applications, and financial aid. College banners from across the country line the hallways.

Like many high schools, Hidalgo has an annual College Night, in which representatives from colleges and universities give information to students and families. But unlike most schools, in the weeks and months before College Night, students and parents attend meetings and receive packets of information about college requirements, applications, and financial aid. After College Night, they receive help, during and after school, in researching colleges, completing applications, writing essays, filling out financial-aid forms, and applying for scholarships. The high school also organizes an annual Career Day, a popular local event where community members describe their careers and how they got started, including the role of education. Prior to the event, each high school student receives a unique schedule of presentations to attend, depending on his or her career interests.

The district's focus on education and careers helps provide *all* students with post-secondary options. "There is no difference between career tech as college and UT as

college," said Blaha, the former superintendent. "They're all going to college, and they feel like they're going to college. We don't separate them." He paused, then continued: "What do we do for the bottom 25 percent? That's where, as educators, it's our responsibility to find a solution. They're somebody's child. If I'm number 188 of 188 students, I still go home to somebody. That student deserves the opportunity."

In developing a college-going culture, the district works directly with parents, few of whom have been to college. Through activities in English and Spanish, the district informs parents about educational practices in the United States, engages them in advocating for their children's college and career goals, and helps them identify and pursue their own educational goals. According to Arnulfo Ruiz, the college readiness facilitator at the junior high school, "Parents are calling *us* now. That is a crucial component about what is early college."

Most school districts offer parents the opportunity to volunteer in classrooms, but Hidalgo has hired a parental liaison at each school to actively engage parents in classroom and school activities. The liaisons are parents themselves; they speak Spanish, are known in the community, and help parents feel more comfortable on school campuses.

The district also actively encourages parents to pursue their own educational goals. At Parent Academies, the district

offers adult education in English as a second language, GED classes, computer instruction, and preparation for the Texas Higher Education Assessment. The district emphasizes parent education because it strengthens the community and completes the full circle—so that students have strong role models in their own families. Two years ago, Sandra Martinez (a parent of an eleventh-grader and two graduates of Hidalgo High School) didn't speak much English, and neither she nor her husband had graduated from high school. Now, her husband has a GED and she is working on hers as well. "This is very important to demonstrate to my children," she said in flawless English. "If I can do it, they can do it."

Developing Strong College Partnerships

To help students succeed in their first college courses, Hidalgo worked with UT-Pan American—and later with South Texas College and Texas State Technical College as well—to align coursework and comprehensive supports. The president of UT-Pan American at the time, Blandina Cárdenas, provided visible leadership. In addition, the University of Texas System and the Communities Foundation of Texas/Texas High School Project served as intermediaries, providing support, advice, and networking.

Hidalgo also has benefited from consistent management at UT-Pan American,



OPPOSITE PAGE: PHOTO © DIAZ JR. HIGH MEDIA CLUB; ABOVE: PHOTO BY MICHAEL STRAVATO / © 2010 JOBS FOR THE FUTURE



CLOCKWISE: BEGINNING UPPER LEFT: PHOTO © JENNIFER VILLARREAL; PHOTO BY MICHAEL STRAVATO / © 2010 JOBS FOR THE FUTURE; PHOTO © DIAZ JR. HIGH MEDIA CLUB

where Senior Vice Provost for Undergraduate Studies, Academic Assessment and Retention Ana Maria Rodriguez has directed the early college program since its inception. During the planning year, 2005–2006, she frequently brought professors and others from the university to the district for parent nights, assemblies, and other events. A council of district and university representatives—including administrators, teachers, and faculty—met monthly to plan course alignment at the high school, improvements in instructional rigor, approval of course syllabi and testing, the development of student supports, reforms at the junior high school, changes in professional development, logistical issues, and other components of early college.

The first college courses for Hidalgo's early college students were offered in summer 2008, mostly to rising juniors: six sections of communications and computer science classes to 180 students. Rodriguez was very deliberate in selecting faculty

members who had been effective with underprepared students, but even these professors found that they had to adjust their teaching styles, shortening their lectures and expanding their engagement strategies. Once they did that, she said, they "were amazed at how the kids could meet the expectations."

Just as college professors learned to adapt their instruction, high school teachers have changed their practices. For example, the prompts that English teachers previously used in twelfth grade have been shifted down to eleventh grade, and many are now introduced to tenth-graders. According to Sylvia Arcaute, who teaches English, "I focus on the literature that is focused on in college. You have to expose them."

One of the first major challenges that the team from Hidalgo and UT-Pan American faced in creating an early college district was developing a range of postsecondary options for students who were not interested in pursuing a four-year degree. "When

we started this partnership," said Rodriguez, "we did not include the community college in the partnership.... That was a mistake."

Prior to the early college program, Hidalgo High School already had been working with the nearby community college, South Texas College, to provide a small number of dual-enrollment courses to students. After the first year of early college, Hidalgo expanded this relationship with South Texas College and Texas State Technical College in Harlingen. South Texas College now serves as Hidalgo's primary postsecondary partner.

For Hidalgo students who have passed the Texas Higher Education Assessment, the state-required college-readiness assessment, UT-Pan American and South Texas College provide transfer-level college courses in general education subjects, from science and math to humanities and social science. South Texas College and Texas State Technical College also provide career-related courses, many of which do

not require student clearance of the state readiness assessment. This enables a broader student population to earn college credits within the framework of a high school program. Even though some of these courses may not be transferable beyond the community college, the classes—in aviation mechanics, nursing, and computer-assisted design, among others—lead to certificates or degrees. In addition, they introduce students to professional terminology and networking—particularly important for those who are learning English as a second language—and provide them with college credits that help motivate them to continue their education.

As the high school's need for college offerings in core academic areas grew, the school district realized that using Hidalgo teachers as adjunct college faculty associated with UT-Pan American or South Texas College was a more practical way of providing these courses at scale. With the nearest college campus a 20-minute drive from Hidalgo, the district recognized that providing college classes at the high school was key to making transportation costs manageable.* As a result, the district has created incentives for teachers to become adjuncts. Through UT-Pan American and South Texas College, Hidalgo teachers who have master's degrees in their teaching field can apply to become affiliated faculty. The school district encourages teachers to obtain this status by providing a \$3,000 increase in base pay to all who earn a master's in their teaching field. (In contrast, teachers who earn a master's in education receive only a \$1,000 increase.) The district also pays an additional \$500 for every college course that these instructors teach at the high school. Teachers who have adjunct status with South Texas College also receive \$350 per class directly from the college.

The difference between high school and college, said Lyn Onato, a high school mathematics instructor affiliated with South Texas College, is that high school students are surrounded by support sys-

tems that they're familiar with, and teachers understand their needs. "We follow the syllabus," she said. "But we give them more support."

Aligning Courses and Career Pathways for College Success

Hidalgo's efforts to create better aligned and more rigorous courses have now reached the middle grades, with plans for examining the fifth- to sixth-grade transition. As part of an early college expansion grant provided by the Texas Educational Agency, four teams of Hidalgo's junior high and high school teachers—in language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies—worked during the summers of 2008 and 2009 to "backwards map" curricular requirements from eleventh grade to sixth grade so students would be prepared to take college courses by their junior year.

In the junior high and high schools, counselors encourage each student to identify a core subject area of interest and strength and to participate in pre-AP and AP courses in at least that subject. According to former superintendent Blaha, "Our AP courses are open enrollment. Our AP test scores are not great, but I'm not worried about that. We want students to take more AP courses. If you don't pass the AP test at the end, is it a failure? No, because we raised the level of expectation of what we want from you."

During the summer before high school, all rising ninth-graders are expected to participate in an intensive four-week session focusing on math and language arts. A majority of the incoming class participates, and at the end of the session they take the Texas Higher Education Assessment (THEA). Students who pass sections of the test can begin taking transfer-level college courses in the areas that they have passed.† The high school uses THEA results to plan accelerated, pre-AP, and AP coursework as well as supports that lead all students toward earning college credits by graduation. Counselors help those who do not pass the THEA or sections of it as rising ninth-graders determine when they are ready to retake it. The district offers the test about once a month and pays the costs for each student's first two tries.

†Even those who do not pass the test can take some dual-enrollment classes that earn required elective college credits, such as art and music appreciation, and selected college classes in career pathways.



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Developing Comprehensive Student Supports

The Hidalgo school district emphasizes a personal, hands-on approach with students and families. At all its schools, the principals, assistant principals, counselors, teachers—and even the bus drivers and other staff—make an effort to get to know students and their parents and be responsive to their needs.

At the junior high and high schools, students and their families have come to rely increasingly on counselors for a wide range of support and guidance, and the counselors' role has expanded substantially since the inception of early college. According to Cristito Lamos, a high school counselor for six years and a math teacher for twelve, "Our job probably tripled." Beginning in junior high school, counselors meet with students and parents to explain the high school's complex college and career options. In high school, they closely monitor students' credits to ensure that all students stay on track to graduation. They let students know when to retake the THEA so they can enroll in more college courses, and they work with students to adjust their educational

(Continued on page 40)



*Hidalgo students take college classes for free. But for the Hidalgo school district, there are three key costs associated with early college: transportation of students to college campuses; textbooks, which routinely cost between \$75 and \$150 per book, and often can only be used for one year; and tuition fees or teacher salaries. Currently, none of Hidalgo's postsecondary partners charge tuition for Hidalgo students who take courses on their campus, but that might change based on state regulations, grant funding, and their own financial conditions.



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Early College High Schools

(Continued from page 20)

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and career plans along the way.

Former Hidalgo High School principal Marilu Navarro, who has also served as the school's college-readiness coordinator, said that a hands-on approach has been vital for the students. For example, she said that students rushed into her office after attending the first day of a college psychology course. The professor had given them a syllabus with reading assignments and let them know that he would be calling on several students each day in class, asking questions based on the readings. If a student didn't know the answer, that student could expect an F for the day. The students were in a panic; they didn't know what to do. She suggested they start a study group, and helped them learn to outline and discuss their assigned readings. Once they learned to help one another, they passed the course. "It's about teaching them the college culture, the college mentality," she said. "They may be enrolled in a college course, but they're still 14. It may take four years to get them there, but we're hoping that when they do leave us, they leave us with that mentality of 'I'm independent. I can ask questions. I can go explore.'"

Besides having a wide range of counseling options, Hidalgo's students also have access to a wide range of academic interventions outside of class. In 2009–2010, the junior high school changed its school day to create an advisory period. Students needing assistance in math or language arts are tutored, in groups of about 10 to 15 students, by their core teachers. Other students are grouped in larger classes and participate in enrichment activities, such as reading novels, writing, or creating presentations.

At the high school, the eight-period day builds in flexibility for academic tutoring during school. All teachers are scheduled for two planning periods: a personal planning period and a common one for teachers in the same department. Early in each semester, teachers use the common period to meet daily with their department to discuss their curriculum, align their lessons, and identify students who may need extra help. After the first several weeks, the common periods are used to pull students out and provide

tutoring, including additional preparation for the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (the state assessment for school accountability) and the THEA. Teachers also provide tutoring after school every day and on Saturdays. Students who need additional support are directed to stay after hours, and busing is provided late so students can get home. Teachers receive extra compensation for Saturdays, but not for afternoon weekdays. Bishakha Mukherji, who teaches English, said, "Many [students] don't have computers at home, so we stay as long as they need."

Moving Forward

The Hidalgo Independent School District is at a crossroads: Its first group of early college students graduated in June 2010. The original grant funding for its early college programs has ended. Its postsecondary partnerships with its nearby university, community college, and technical college are changing as those institutions wrestle with their own budget challenges. And the district is taking steps to sustain the initiative—including applying for grants,

streamlining procedures, finding cost savings, and doing everything it can to build on its early college approach.

According to Blaha, it's not a question of turning back but of determining the best ways to move forward—because students, parents, and the community have already accepted success in college as the goal of high school. "We know we can do this," he said. "We've convinced ourselves that this is possible."

Carlos Cardoza, treasurer of the school board and a trustee for 14 years, has several children, all of whom, he said, have the ability to succeed in college. But his oldest daughter graduated from high school well before the early college program took effect. In college, she had to take remedial classes, which have slowed her progress toward her degree. "That's where they fall behind," he said. "And that makes it a lot different, in the pocketbook ... because you have to pay for that." In contrast, "These kids now that graduate, they're ready," he said. "We may not be a big school, but our kids are doing all right. That's why we call this a little treasure on the border." □

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