



THE GREAT MAINE SCHOOLS PROJECT

AT THE SENATOR GEORGE J. MITCHELL
SCHOLARSHIP RESEARCH INSTITUTE

EARLY COLLEGE IN MAINE: STUDENT OUTCOMES & LESSONS LEARNED FROM ONE MODEL

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“I didn’t care about school, but since I started the early college program at York County Community College I began realizing that my future depends on what I do now, and that forced me to do better and set more goals for myself. And now, not only am I doing better in school, I feel better about myself...I’ve learned so much.”

--Maggie, junior at Wells High School

“The Program had a tremendous impact on me. I had a better appreciation for school. Being in classes with students who actually want to be there really motivated me....Everything about the Program worked for me. It helped me figure out where I wanted to go in my life.”

--Cassandra, Program graduate and Clark University freshman

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Early college experiences allow high school students to engage in college-level academic work and earn both high school and college credit while still in high school. The York County Community College Early College (YCCC) Program with Wells High School (WHS) offers a promising model for improving the academic achievement, college-going rates, and longer-term educational attainment of high school students. While many high school programs that offer early college experiences target only high-achieving students, the program model developed at YCCC and WHS is specifically designed to serve students who may not be considering college an option, including students who would be the first in their family to attend college, who are struggling academically and socially in high school, or who might face significant financial barriers to college. The Program gives participating students the opportunity to take college courses on a community college campus for dual credit (students earn both high school and college credit for successfully completing a college class—also known as “dual enrollment”) during their junior and senior years of high school. The Program covers the costs of student tuition and fees and provides on-site support services from a Program Coordinator based at YCCC and an Advocate at the high school.

Student Profile: Chris



Chris took two classes, English and Psychology, at YCCC during his senior year at WHS. Chris describes himself as “not exactly a star student” in high school, but he earned an A- and a B+ in his college classes. Although he had a high school GPA equivalent to a C- when he entered the Program, Chris says, “I was actually an A/B student my last semester of high school. I’m pretty pleased with that.”

Chris’s parents are retired from the military, and up until the end of his junior year, he expected to enter the military rather than enroll in college. Now as a full-time student at YCCC, Chris is pursuing a teaching career and expects to eventually complete an advanced degree. Chris is more active and engaged in college than he ever was in high school, and he thinks that he is exceeding his parents’ expectations. “They’re proud that I’m in college and that I made the first step,” Chris reports.

Chris believes that the encouragement and availability of the Program’s coordinator for one-on-one counseling worked particularly well for him. Commenting on his experience in the Program, Chris says, “It made me realize the importance of college, and that I could do the work. I thought that I couldn’t do the work in high school, but now I realize that was totally wrong.”

Fifty-nine students participated in the first three semesters of the Program. The typical participating student has a high school grade-point average equivalent to a C+; has not taken either an honors-level or Advanced Placement course, or a math course above Algebra II; and does not have a parent with a college degree. Given the profile of entering students, student outcomes from the first three semesters are encouraging:

- **48 students completed 125 college classes**, earning grades of C or higher in 108 (86%) of them.
- Participating students earned an aggregate GPA of 2.97 (just below a B) in their college classes. **Nearly two-thirds (64%) of the students earned a college GPA equivalent to B- or higher.**
- While nearly one-half (49%) of participating students reported that they planned to attend college full-time after high school, this proportion increased to nearly two-thirds (65%) by the end of three

semesters. **The proportion of students reporting that they planned to attend four-year college full-time increased from 37% to 51%.**

- Among 31 participating students who had graduated from WHS as of June 2005, **nearly two-thirds (65%) are now enrolled full-time in college.** Among 16 students who graduated in 2005, the rate is even higher—12 of them (75%) are now full-time college students. These college-going rates significantly exceed Maine’s statewide college-going average of 50% (Maine Compact for Higher Education, 2005).
- **Nearly three-fourths (72%) of students improved their high school GPA while participating in the Program,** and nearly one-half (49%) improved their GPA by one grade point or more.

Many participating students report that they found the early college experience liberating compared to high school, and that, for them, the college environment is better suited to their learning style. The following comments are representative of student perceptions:

- **“Learning is easier here because everyone in all my classes really wants to learn.”**
- **“People treat you with more respect, and expect more from you. It’s a great feeling.”**
- **“There are older people in my classes and it shows me how important it is to do well now so I won’t have to come back when I’m 30 or 40.”**
- **“You have a lot more freedom, but the work is harder and you have no one to push you.”**

Program staff and administrators observe that the Program has had an enormous impact on both the high school and college. At WHS, the Program has contributed to an emerging **trend of more academically rigorous course-taking** among students, while it has also increased the number of WHS graduates enrolling in community colleges. At the college, the Program created opportunities for more dual-enrollment partnerships with other area high schools, and secondary students now make up 12% of YCCC’s total enrollment.

Faculty at WHS report noticeable improvements in motivation, college aspirations, and other indicators among students who were participating in the Program. YCCC faculty who taught participating students compared them favorably to other community college students when it came to attendance, behavior in class, and interactions with faculty. The following comments are representative of faculty perceptions:

- **“More students are able to learn in more meaningful ways. Many of them learn that they are more capable than they thought.”**
- **“I see evidence of increased self-esteem, willingness to take on challenges, and accountability. Their expectations of their peers have increased—Program students call others on whining or lame excuses.”**

Even on a relatively small scale—serving roughly one-quarter of the Wells junior and senior classes—the Program’s impact on WHS, YCCC, and the participating students has been considerable. Students, staff, and administrators report that key factors in the Program’s success have been: (1) the opportunity for students to take college courses on a college campus alongside college students, and (2) the availability of staff to advocate for and support students both at the high school and college.

Several **lessons learned** during the first three semesters of the Program may be valuable for other high schools and colleges planning to establish early college programs in their communities:

- **Increasing high school graduation requirements and encouraging all students to take an academically rigorous course of studies** (college-preparatory English, mathematics, science, and

social studies courses all four years of high school) will help prepare students for college-level work in advance of graduation.

- Requiring students and their families to make a small financial contribution, such as paying for books, could help strengthen student commitment and conserve resources that could be used to allow more students to participate.
- When deciding which students to admit into an early college program, factors such as good high school attendance records and having earned enough credits for an on-time graduation can help to identify those students who are ready to embrace the challenges of college-level courses.

Early college is an effective strategy for preparing more high school students for college and encouraging more students to enroll in higher education. To create a statewide system of early college opportunities, sustainability issues must be addressed—and everyone has a role to play. **School district** budgets need to commit to support early college programs, and these investments could be stimulated by providing a **state match**, potentially through the Essential Programs and Services funding formula, the state budget, or some other mechanism. **Colleges** can make valuable contributions by reducing or waiving tuition and fees for early college students. Creative approaches to **local fundraising** can provide supplemental funding. Working together to make these investments, we can create a statewide early college program that will greatly benefit the state of Maine and its students.

Student Profile: Sagan



Sagan entered the Program as a junior, and that year she improved her grade-point average from a C to a B. Commenting on her high school experience, Sagan says, “I was a pretty bad student. I didn’t do my work, I wasn’t focused, and I didn’t really care.” She also says that the College Success Management course she took at YCCC helped her learn how to use her time more effectively and improve her writing. Sagan thinks the class “should really be given in high school.”

Sagan is now taking two Advanced Placement courses and a genetics class at WHS, and Graphic Design at YCCC. She has applied early admission to her first-choice college, where she hopes to earn a bachelor’s degree in equestrian studies and business. As the first person in her family to attend college, Sagan says, “My parents didn’t expect this much of me. They are really excited that I’m going to college.”

Sagan also reports the Program “showed me that people really do care out there and that they want to help you out.” She mentions that she likes the freedom of taking classes at the college during the school day, and that the experience made her want to attend a four-year college or university rather than a community college. Sagan thinks that “a lot of kids come out of high school really unprepared,” and encourages teachers to “push them a little more academically, and help them get started sooner thinking about what they want to do” after high school.

Additional copies of this summary and the full report are available from:

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