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Commentary

The Promise of Early College

By Stephen Tremaine

The intensive efforts being made to help low-income students succeed in college aren't adding up. Collectively, these failures amount to one of the most disastrous statistics in American education: In 2009, 89 percent of first-generation college students left college before earning a degree.

The disconnect between secondary and postsecondary institutions lies at the heart of the problem: Many high-poverty public high schools lack the resources to prepare students for college reading and writing requirements; many colleges and universities, meanwhile, are unaccustomed to extending meaningful academic opportunities beyond their campuses. In this way, low-income high schoolers are very often confronted by both the weakest bridge between high school and college and the widest gulf to cross.

The importance of collaboration between institutions of higher education and high schools is clear: When low-income students drop out of college, both secondary and postsecondary institutions have failed. In a national education climate more attuned than ever to college access and completion, we should vigorously pursue opportunities for direct collaboration between the institutions that run grades 9-12 and those that run grades 13-16.

Early-college initiatives, in which high school students immerse themselves in all or part of a college course of study, have proven to be a particularly successful form of secondary-postsecondary school collaboration. These initiatives have achieved noteworthy results across differing institutional, regional, and structural contexts. A closer look at how several such programs operate offers a compelling vision of how colleges and universities can work with high schools to respond to the higher education achievement gap.

Bard High School Early College in New York City, a partnership between Bard College, a private liberal arts institution, and the New York City Department of Education, was one of the schools to pioneer an early college in the public setting. In its program, two years of a college liberal arts education are provided within the four years of high school, with the 9th and 10th grades being directed toward teaching college-ready skills, and students in grades 11 and 12 actually doing college work, with classes taught by college faculty members working full time at the school. Providing a template for dozens of high school early colleges that have followed, the Bard High School Early College schools have yielded remarkable results: Most of the diverse students enrolled earn an associate degree by the time they graduate from the four-year program, and more than 95 percent of them enroll in four-year colleges following their graduation, many as transfer students.

Bard has built on this success through the Bard Early College in New Orleans, which reflects a different model of collaboration. It offers Bard-accredited humanities seminars in partnership with 12 New Orleans public high schools. All courses are taught on the high school campus by college faculty members with terminal degrees in their fields. The New Orleans program works closely with participating high schools and the district to set up satellite Bard campuses within the schools: Bard enrolls students, conducts classes, puts on symposia, holds office hours, and, to the greatest extent allowed by the circumstances, goes about the business of a college.

When low-income students drop out of college, both secondary and postsecondary institutions have failed. The New Orleans students enroll in a two-year course of study designed to introduce the liberal arts and sciences, strengthen critical writing and analysis, and develop tools for thriving in higher education. The

program's students—96 percent of whom are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch—read and respond critically to the works of Plato, W.E.B. Du Bois, Galileo, and others. Ninety-eight percent of the high school seniors who have completed Bard early-college coursework report having been accepted to a college or university.

High-school-to-college collaborations have seen similar results in Ohio, where 100 percent of the Dayton Early College Academy's low-income and African-American graduates enroll immediately in college. A collaboration between the University of Dayton and the Dayton public schools, the academy offers a largely disadvantaged student body nearly full access to the resources of the university. Dayton Early College Academy is housed on the university's campus, its students enroll in university courses, and professors there serve as their mentors and advisers. It is one of a network of high-achieving early-college high schools throughout the state. Initiated by the KnowledgeWorks Foundation, this network is mobilizing institutions of higher education to extend such transformative opportunities to students in some of Ohio's most economically depressed public school districts.

Similarly, high schools and colleges across New York City have benefited from collaboration between the City University of New York and the city's department of education. Cuny's Manhattan Hunter Science High School—a partnership with Hunter College—screens its applicants based largely on motivation and curiosity. In 2007, all of its students graduated from high school, and 17 percent earned between 20 and 30 college credits. More than 87 percent of these students are members of minority groups.

How can we explain the success of these programs, which have thrived in very different settings, institutions, and structures? Two essential commitments, shared by all the programs mentioned, are worth emphasizing:

- *There is no slack in academic quality between the higher education institution's traditional and early-college courses.* Rather than watering down coursework, the college partner offers younger students an academic experience that emphatically and uncompromisingly reflects that institution's highest standards. In the context of high school—a level of education that has been intellectually decimated in the name of assessment—these programs recall students and educators to the pleasures of scholarship: Beyond the quantified attainment of technical skills, intellectual work is shown to be rewarding as an affirmation of the strength of human expression and the force of intellect.

- *The early college emphasizes not just college-level material but, more importantly, college-level inquiry.* It is misleading to think of early college simply as accelerated high school. These programs are not about asking students to study the same material in a more advanced textbook, but rather about helping them learn new ways of thinking critically, expressing intellectual curiosity, and engaging in critical analysis. These habits of mind are compatible not only with college academics, but also, and more broadly, with effective citizenship. In this sense, the early-college seminar is less about the questions that students are answering than the questions they're asking.

The success of such programs does not signify the failure of high schools. The schools with which Bard College partners in New Orleans are staffed by smart and fiercely determined people. But schools that are drastically underresourced, politically embattled, and under the constant duress of high-stakes testing should not be asked to take on the enormous challenge of preparing students for college on their own. Responding to the needs of public high schools is a powerful reminder of the mission on which institutions of higher education were founded: to invest in the intellectual development of young people for the sake of a more pluralistic and prosperous society. Cross-institutional approaches such as those of Bard College, the University of Dayton, and the City University of New York are transforming secondary education by building intellectually sound bridges from high school to college.

Institutions of higher education nationwide should build on these successes by reaching out to other public schools and school districts. A national early-college initiative with a solid commitment to academic quality (rather than merely the charitable shelling-out of college credits) would yield dramatic results in

college preparedness—especially among those students who face the most daunting obstacles to higher education.

Without offering our high school students substantive opportunities to prepare themselves for college, we don't stand a chance of making higher education in the United States as democratic, inclusive, and excellent as our society requires.

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