



Response to Notice Inviting Suggestions for New Experiments for the Experimental Sites Initiative

January 31, 2014

Introduction: About Early Colleges

Early colleges are partnerships between schools districts and Institutions of Higher Education that allow high school-age students in public schools to complete both their high school diploma and a tuition-free college course of study, earning college credits up to an associate's degree. There are approximately 300 early college high schools across the country with a range of structures and focus areas, including liberal arts and sciences and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields. While early colleges, which fall under the larger category of dual enrollment, have flexibility in design, they also have several defining characteristics. These characteristics include offering high school-age students a structured, credit-bearing college course of study, ensuring that college courses are taught by college faculty and meet the academic standards of the partner college, and providing robust support services to help students excel. Early college high schools are public schools, and they often serve students who are underrepresented in higher education.

National data on early colleges show their success in improving student achievement. Research demonstrates that early college students are significantly more likely to graduate from high school, enroll in college, and earn a college degree than comparable students who did not attend an early college.¹ In addition to improving academic outcomes, early college high schools save money for students and their families by allowing students to complete up to two years of college, tuition-free, during the four years of high school.² These savings can range from up to approximately \$27,200 to \$72,600 for two years of college tuition at public and private colleges, respectively.³

Early colleges effectively rethink the traditional high school to college continuum and create seamless, affordable, efficient pathways for students to and through college. However, there is currently no federal funding stream to support early colleges and compensate them for offering students credit-bearing college courses from accredited Institutions of Higher Education. This lack of funding has limited the development and growth of early colleges to a relatively small number of states and school districts that have been able to identify local funding sources.

Allowing Pell Grants to go to early colleges on behalf of eligible students would make early colleges nationally sustainable and encourage more school districts and Institutions of Higher Education across the country to develop early college programs. *Most importantly, this critical policy change would result in improved students outcomes in college and reduced higher education costs.*

¹ American Institutes for Research, *Early College, Early Success: Early College High School Initiative Impact Study*, June 2013.

² Some students spend five years in early college in order to earn both a high school diploma and an associate's degree.

³ National Center for Education Statistics, *Fast Facts: Tuition Costs of Colleges and Universities*, <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=76>.

Proposal Overview

We propose two experiments to evaluate the impact in terms of student outcomes and higher education costs of allowing Pell Grants to support students taking college courses in early colleges. In both experiments, participating early colleges would have to meet criteria established by the U.S. Department of Education.

We believe the experiments will show improved student outcomes for Pell-eligible students in early colleges, as measured by increased rates of student persistence and completion in college and faster time to degree completion. By preparing for college in the early years of high school and starting college early, early college students are better prepared for college coursework and do not spend time and money on remedial courses that do not count for credit. As a result, early college students are more likely to finish their college degrees and less likely to drop out. We also expect to see reduced costs of higher education for students, due to the lower cost of college in early colleges (as these schools are tuition-free) and the faster time to degree completion.

In order to carry out this experiment, the U.S. Department of Education will need to waive the regulatory requirement in 20 USC § 1091 (a)(1) stipulating that to receive aid, students must “not be enrolled in an elementary or secondary school.”

Proposal 1: Extend Pell Eligibility to Early College Students

In the first proposed experiment, students of early colleges would apply for Pell Grants before each academic year. Students would be awarded a Pell Grant based on their economic circumstances and the additional per student cost of the early college.⁴ Approved early colleges would receive a Pell Grant on behalf of each Pell-eligible student enrolled in college courses. The Pell Grant funds would be applied towards college tuition costs on behalf of eligible students - costs that the high school and college partners in early colleges currently absorb. Students’ remaining semesters of Pell Grant awards after graduating from early college would be reduced by the number of college semesters in which they enrolled during the early college, thereby maintaining the maximum number of semesters of Pell Grants that students can access.

Proposal 2: Extend Pell Eligibility to Early College Students and Fund Early Colleges Retroactively for Credits and Degrees Completed by Students

Under our second proposal, early colleges would receive Pell Grants retroactively, based on the schools’ performance, as measured by college semesters completed by early college students. To increase accountability and avoid creating participation incentives for low-quality programs interested in accessing student aid dollars, students’ Pell Grants would be given to their early colleges retroactively, at the time of graduation, based on the number of college semesters the students completed. For example, an early college would receive one year of Pell funding on behalf of eligible students who completed one year of a college course of study (e.g. earning at least 24 credits for full-time students) in an early college at the time of graduation, and two years of Pell funding on behalf of eligible students who completed two years of a college course of study (e.g. earning at least 48 credits and up to an Associate’s degree for full-time students) in an early college at the time of graduation.⁵

To maintain the Pell time parameters, the students’ total Pell Grant allotments after the early college would be reduced by the number of college semesters they completed in the early college. For example, students earning an associate’s degree concurrently with a high school diploma would have eight semesters of remaining Pell Grants, rather than twelve. This arrangement ensures that early colleges receive public funding based on performance and avoids penalizing students who fail to earn a substantial number of college credits in an early college program. This arrangement also maintains the traditional timing of students’ applications for financial aid, which could limit confusion among students and counselors.

⁴ The additional costs of early college are the costs of the education above the high school funding provided by the local school district partner.

⁵ Pell-eligible students in early colleges, as with their counterparts on traditional college campuses, would not have to be enrolled in a full-time course of study.

Evaluation

There are several ways in which evaluators could measure the impact of allowing Pell Grants to go to early colleges on behalf of eligible students. As one option, the experiment could compare early college students in the first college year of the program (typically 11th grade) with freshman students with similar characteristics at traditional two- and four-year colleges. (Approved early college sites could be chosen from across the country or from a particular state with a strong network of early colleges.) The students could be matched by various demographic characteristics, such as socio-economic status, gender, and race; by academic characteristics such as PSAT score, local and state standardized assessments, and 10th grade high school GPA; and by geographic location, such as zip code or school district. Students' full-time or part-time status should also be taken into account. This approach would largely control for intrinsic motivation, since the comparison group would be enrolled in college – if anything a higher bar than enrollment in early college, depending on the admissions criteria and application processes. Ideally students would be followed for up to six years (150% time to bachelor's degree completion) and compared on several outcome measures, such as college credits earned, persistence rates, degree attainment or graduation rates, efficient use of Pell dollars, and student debt. A shorter time frame would allow for comparisons by metrics such as remedial education needs, college credits earned, and college persistence rates.

We believe the evaluation would show higher college persistence and completion rates, reduced remedial education costs, and reduced time to degree completion among students in the early college treatment group. We also expect to see savings to students and reduction in student loan debt due to the improved college persistence and graduation rates and the lower cost to students of college (no tuition, just the Pell Grant reimbursement) in early colleges.

Conclusion

The two experiments we propose to the U.S. Department of Education would provide critical support for early colleges and would lead to a demonstrable improvement in student achievement in college and reduction in the cost of higher education, both to the student and to the federal government. The proposed experiments, particularly Proposal 2, would allow the U.S. Department of Education to demonstrate savings to the Pell Grant program, from the more effective use of dollars.

Given the research findings indicating that early college students are significantly more likely to graduate from high school, enroll in college, and earn a college degree than comparable students who did not attend an early college, expanding Pell eligibility to students of early colleges would be an effective investment of the U.S. Department of Education's resources and in line with the Department's goals of improving student outcomes and reducing the costs of higher education.

For questions, please contact:

Clara Haskell Botstein
 Director of Early College Strategy, Bard College
 Mailing address: Bard High School Early College
 525 East Houston Street, New York, NY 10012
 Email: cbotstein@bard.edu; Phone: 914-388-0699

Endorsed by (in alphabetical order):

Bard College
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