

By Jais Zurita

On the first day of school, I expected a normal high school class, but instead I was handed a college syllabus with serious expectations, deadlines, and college credits. It felt like I had skipped ahead a few years. As I learned about all the college preparation built into my high school, I learned that early college isn't just regular high school, it's a way to start your future sooner and take on real responsibility. As an early college student, I have been able to see firsthand how much of an impact the early college program can have. Early college isn't just about earning college credits and graduating with an Associate degree - for me, it's about taking initiative on progressing in my life. I find myself reflecting on who I was during freshman year and who I am now, and it leaves me in awe. The Bard Early College program has helped instill confidence and has shown me what I am capable of. These experiences are just a few of the many reasons why I believe more students should have an opportunity to experience programs like this.

Early college programs aren't very common, especially in my home city of Newark, NJ, and I believe this lack of access prevents many students from reaching their full potential. An early college program is a program in which a college program is embedded in a high school, allowing students to take college-level courses, earn college credits, and graduate with their Associate in Arts degree. My school, Bard High School Early College Newark, delivers a Bard College program to the entire student population. In other words, it's a way for students to get the opportunity to challenge themselves academically while still being in a high school environment.

One of the most valuable aspects of an early college program are the advancement opportunities it grants students. Since being in my school, I've had the opportunity to participate in workshops, scholarship programs, internships, and even apply for jobs that would enrich my social and academic skills. For example, I've attended workshops in which the topics were about college and everything you would need to know about applying and enrolling. These gave me insight on scholarships, the financial aspects of college, tuition, programs, internship, majors, minors, and what college is best for your career path. Through these workshops I have been able to get an early insight into what it is that I want to pursue professionally and my goals for the future. Not only that, but I was given the opportunity to be part of an internship while in high school that has helped me elevate my writing skills and get better at public speaking. Early college programs open doors for students to challenge themselves academically, develop essential skills, and prepare for the expectations of higher education and the professional world.

Academic success is not the only outcome. If we take a look deeper into the early college program, we'll see that the early college program plays an important role in building students' confidence and personal growth. When I say confidence, I don't necessarily mean an ego-boost - I mean it helps you see what you're truly capable of. In early college programs, you are taking actual college courses. I found that these classes are not as intimidating as they might sound. I remember at the start of my junior year, I was very scared when looking at my schedule and seeing that I had some college classes. One of my classes was College Seminar, in which we participated heavily in dialogue and socratic seminars. In a socratic seminar about a philosopher and his set of beliefs, I hesitated at first because of my fear of public speaking of any kind, but I pushed myself to speak. Ideas began to flow and I even opened the floor to a different

conversation. After I was done speaking, I felt immense relief. I continued participating in future seminars without worry and no longer viewed this class as a difficult class. This realization helped me feel confident in the work I did moving forward and helped me be more aware of what I am capable of doing. Building confidence and encouraging personal growth are benefits that can have a lasting impact, which is why more students should have access to early college programs.

Early college programs don't just teach students, they change them. Programs like Bard Early College give students a head start, not just in school but in life. If more schools offered early college programs, more students would have the chance to discover their potential, take an initiative in their future, and step into the kind of life they've always dreamed of. Every student deserves that chance.