Getting a Leg Up on College via Early College High Schools

by Frank DiMaria

Time and money are two commodities in short supply for many students in America’s educational system, especially those who are underrepresented. Jobs for the Future, a national initiative that develops policy solutions and new pathways from college readiness to career advancement, helps America’s neediest high school students get a college education quickly and inexpensively.

The Early College High School Initiative, an approach to high school reform administered by Jobs for the Future, offers an alternative to comprehensive high schools. Early college high schools marry high school and college in a rigorous, supportive program, with a twist. Students who attend these progressive schools can shave two years off the time they spend in college. While taking classes toward their high school diploma, early college high school students are also earning up to two years’ worth of credits toward a bachelor’s degree tuition free.

Since 2002, the partner organizations of the Early College High School Initiative have launched or redesigned over 270 schools serving 75,000 students in 28 states and the District of Columbia. Designed for low-income youth, first-generation college goers, English-language learners and students of color, early college high schools are small, but they have the potential to improve high school graduation rates and better prepare these students for high-skill careers.

High schoolers earning college credits is nothing new, but high schoolers mingling with college professors and college students on college campuses is rare. For years, school districts have been offering dual enrollment and Advanced Placement courses. Early college high schools offer far more. Students of early college high schools find themselves immersed in the college environment because 50 percent of early college high schools are physically located on college campuses.

Cecilia Le, senior project manager with Jobs for the Future, says that dual enrollment and advanced placement are valuable, but they could yield credits that might not transfer to a college. Furthermore, historically these programs have been for advanced students. “Early college high schools are an opportunity for all students,” she says. “These schools provide a smooth transition between high school and college for every student. They target students who are underrepresented in higher education.”

Sixty-one percent of early college high school students are on free or reduced lunch, and about half of them are the first in their family to attend college. Forty-three percent of early college high school students are Hispanic. “The exposure to college rigor and expectations is a very powerful experience for students who may not know anything about college or may not have anyone in their family or community who have gone to college or graduated from college or had any expectations of going to college. So what we find is that early college demystifies the college experience [for these students],” says Le.

Early college high schools are a shot in the arm for those from families in which college is rarely, if ever, discussed and of whom little is expected. “The very nature of being in a college environment actually raises the expectations of students, parents, teachers and professors. ... Over 80 percent of our students are first-generation college students; it is so powerful for them to take a college credit class. When they go back to their mom and dad and their family reunions and fiestas and they can say, ‘I’m in ninth grade, and I have six or eight or 10 or 12 college credit hours,’ that is just so powerful,” says Janice D. Lombardi, Ed.D., principal at Trini Garza Early College High School in the Dallas Independent School District, in Dallas, Texas.

Early college high schools don’t just demystify the college experience, as Le puts it; they get results. In the 2010-11 school year, early college high schools nationwide had a median four-year graduation rate of 93 percent, compared to 76 percent for their school districts. Ninety-three percent of their graduates earned at least some college credits, and 56 percent earned two or more years of college credit.

These statistics are impressive, but they pale in comparison to those of...
Lombardi’s Trini Garza High School. In 2012, Trini Garza graduated every single one of its seniors while the state of Texas had a 78.8 percent graduation rate and the district had a 76 percent rate. Eighty-six percent of the students who attend Trini Garza are on free/reduced lunch, and the school is 84 percent Hispanic, 83 percent of which are on free/reduced lunch.

Trini Garza was established in 2006. It is embedded on the Mountain View College campus, occupying the ground floor of the west campus of the two-year community college. The school educates about 400 students from ninth to 12th grade and receives about 500 applications for entry into the ninth grade for each fall semester. “The applications have increased over the course of the last three years as word spreads within the community about the success of early college,” says Lombardi.

Acceptance into Trini Garza is based on a lottery system, with no academic requirements. Lombardi and her staff interview all applicants, not to determine if they can handle the rigorous academic environment but to make sure the students themselves want to attend Trini Garza and are not being pushed in that direction by their parents. Since the high school, the college and the district make a serious commitment to each early college student, Lombardi seeks those willing to accept the challenge of a rigorous academic environment enthusiastically. Trini Garza is open access to all and in the past has educated special education students, dyslexic students and those with 504 plans. “What we offer is a little different than a comprehensive high school. We tailor our programs to meet the needs of each individual student,” says Lombardi.

She attributes her school’s perfect graduation rate to its high expectations and rigorous curriculum. But the impressive graduation rate is only half the story. Trini Garza graduates are college-ready, whether they earn two year’s worth of college credits or fewer. Forty-six of Lombardi’s 86 graduates in 2012 earned an associate degree, and more than 50 of the 86 graduated on the distinguished high school graduation plan, a rigorous curriculum in Texas. On average, Trini Garza graduates earned about 30 hours in 2012. Lombardi estimates that students who earn an associate degree while at Trini Garza save about $6,000, when she considers what they would have paid in tuition and on textbooks.

Because Trini Garza is on the Mountain View campus, its students attend classes with college students, many of whom have life experiences far different than high school students. To narrow the gap between these two populations, professors scaffold their lessons through tutoring and other support systems for the Trini Garza students. “We hold their hand for a longer time. This is important because 80 percent of our students are first-time college goers. And many have parents who have not even completed high school,” says Lombardi.

To ensure the success of all her students, Lombardi uses data. Not just hard-performance data, but data on the number of homeless students and students with learning disabilities. She establishes a roundtable for each student at which she and her faculty meet with students’ parents. She insists that support teams meet once a week to identify students who would benefit from mentoring for everything from social to academic issues. “We help our kids one-on-one. Everything we do is individualized. We never have a one-size-fits-all thing,” says Lombardi.

Students at Trini Garza do not choose a major. Ninth- and 10th-grade students are encouraged to explore as they learn their strengths and weaknesses. Enrolling students are placed in an Associate of Arts degree program in which they are exposed to more and more courses. Some jump to an Associate of Science program. “Our goal is to get them an associate degree so they can finish and move on to a university in Texas. All universities in Texas by law are required to accept someone with an associate degree,” says Lombardi.

Because of the many STEM initiatives at Mountain View College, Lombardi has noticed that more students are choosing engineering.
“We’re seeing Hispanic women and men,” says Lombardi. In fact, one female graduate from the first graduation class, Yazman Chalico, is now an officer in the Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers at the University of Texas-Arlington.

Each school in the early college high school initiative is the result of a partnership between the school district and a postsecondary partner, which include community and technical colleges, four-year colleges and universities (both private and public). The postsecondary partners are key players in the design and day-to-day operation of early college high schools, which treat the high school years and the first two years of college as a single, coherent course of study. Seventy-four percent of early college high schools partner with two-year institutions; the rest, with four-year institutions, most of which are public.

The relationship Trini Garza enjoys with Mountain View College has evolved over time. Lombardi, now in her fourth year as principal, found a disconnect between the college and the high school when she arrived. “The college professors deemed high school teachers as not their equal,” says Lombardi.

Through the campus instructional leadership team, all teachers were required to upgrade their teaching qualifications. Those without a master’s degree were required to earn one so they would be qualified to teach dual credit. “We raised the bar of expectations for the teachers. Many already had master’s degrees, but amazingly the relationship with the college began to blossom because [the college professors] began to view them as their peers,” says Lombardi.

To ensure standards remain high for those Mountain View students sharing courses with high schoolers, the agreement between Mountain View and Trini Garza stipulates that dual-credit courses cannot comprise more than three-quarters high school students, with a 50-50 split being most desirable. “They don’t want a high school class; they want a true college class. They want that rigor,” says Lombardi. “A high tide raises all boats.” Mountain View’s professors are finding that the early college students, whether they be English-language learners or have learning difficulties, are some of the hardest-working students on campus, sometimes outperforming the college students. Mountain View professors are eager to teach Trini Garza students.

Today’s high school experience is far more than just academics. Friday night football games, prom, homecoming and extracurricular activities all enhance a high school student’s journey. But those activities are not part of the early college experience. When she arrived at Trini Garza, Lombardi suspected that the lack of school activities had a negative effect on the amount of applications it received. To give her students a more “traditional” high school experience, Lombardi put on a homecoming dance the week before winter break and invited all Trini Garza graduates to attend. “We had crazy sock day and all those silly things they do for homecoming. Those are study days, and there is nobody at the college during those days, so we have the campus to ourselves,” says Lombardi.

Trini Garza also holds a prom, has an urban debate team and was awarded a grant from Motorola to establish a robotics team. Naturally, Trini Garza does not have a football team or the extracurriculars that comprehensive high schools have.

Lack of extracurriculars notwithstanding, it’s clear that Trini Garza’s underrepresented students reap significant benefits from attending an early college high school. And there is an upside for Mountain View too. The state of Texas is focusing on community colleges, and in particular their accountability and students’ completion rate. Many who enroll in community college, sadly, do not persist. But Trini Garza’s perfect graduation rate enhances Mountain View’s student completion rate because 80 percent of its students earn an associate degree. Although not all of them complete the degree in their four years at Trini Garza, their completion still counts towards Mountain View’s rate.

Students who graduate from early college high school earn both a high school diploma and a significant number of college credits; some, even an associate degree. Either outcome gives early college high school graduates a leg up when they enter a two- or four-year college. Early college high schools work with colleges and universities within their states to ensure that their graduates do not lose credits when they enroll at a four-year school. Many states have policies making all credits from community colleges transferable to state schools.