

Early College High Schools: An Answer to College and Career Readiness? A Commentary

Tempestt R. Adams
University of North Carolina at Charlotte

The authors in this 2016 volume of *Urban Education Research and Policy Annuals* study factors impacting African American students across the educational spectrum considering identity development, special education, K-12 education, higher education, and science, technology, engineering and mathematics. To complement these works and two of the embedded themes (K-12 education and higher education), I discuss early college high schools including their purpose, student outcomes, and the need for more research.

What are early college high schools?

Early college high schools (ECHS) are small schools typically connected to and located on a community college or university campus. These small schools were created as an alternative to the traditional high school, which Fischetti, MacKain and Smith (2011) describe as obsolete. Early colleges were designed to increase graduation and college-going rates by providing students with up to sixty college credits upon graduation. Blending high school and college curriculum and access to college campuses motivates students to continue on with their education (Kuo, 2010). What sets early college high schools apart are their target population: students who have traditionally underperformed in school and those that are underrepresented in higher education such as minority students, first-generation college students, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, English language learners, and other underrepresented groups (“Overview & FAQs,” 2013). As a part of the national small school movement, most early college high schools have no more than 400 students enrolled.

What are student outcomes?

In 2013, the American Institute for Research (AIR) and SRI International produced findings from a longitudinal study designed to assess the impacts of early college high schools across a sample of 10 schools. Findings from this study revealed early college high school students were significantly more likely to graduate from high school, attend college and complete college as compared to non-ECHS student attendees. Edmunds (2010) found that early college students are showing higher levels of academic achievement, more positive experiences in schools, fewer absences, and are less likely to be suspended.

What research is needed?

To date, early college high schools remain under-researched (Edmunds et al., 2012; Jacobson, 2005; Kaniuka & Vickers, 2010). Research is needed to further understand student and staff experiences, how the high school and college partnerships are negotiated, and student outcomes. Early colleges are operating as an answer to the call for increasing students’ preparedness for college and careers, both on academic and social levels (Healy, 2009), but continued research is needed to inform educational stakeholders on how this academic space is impacting the lives of students, including their postsecondary preparation.

Final Thought

The impact of an early college high school could be insurmountable as students could graduate with the equivalent of an associate’s degree, which would in turn lessen the time to

complete a bachelor's degree or enable them to immediately enter the workforce. In addition, this saves significant money for students and their families in furthering their education. This is significant considering Black and low-income students are borrowing money for their education at higher amounts and interest rates (Mulesman, 2015). Furthermore, given the early colleges goal of serving students underrepresented in higher education, it serves as one strategy for increasing the presence of students of color, first-generation college students, and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds on our college campuses.

References

- American Institutes for Research & SRI International. (2013). *Early College, early success: Early college high school initiative impact study*. Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research. Retrieved from http://www.air.org/sites/default/files/downloads/report/ECHSI_Impact_Study_Report_Final1_0.pdf
- Edmunds, J. A. (2010). *A better 9th grade: Early results from an experimental study of the early college high school model. A Policy Brief*. Greensboro, NC: SERVE Center. Retrieved from <http://www.serve.org/FileLibraryDetails.aspx?id=179>
- Edmunds, J. A., Bernstein, L., Unlu, F., Glennie, E., Willse, J., Smith, A., & Arshavsky, N. (2012). Expanding the start of the college pipeline: Ninth-grade findings from an experimental study of the impact of the early college high school model. *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*, 5(2), 136-159.
- Fischetti, J., MacKain, S., & Smith, R. (2011). Mr. Watson, come here...: The performance of early college students in their first year at the university and the challenge to P-16 education. *Improving Schools*, 14(1), 48-64.
- Jacobson, J. (2005). The early college experiment. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 51(27), 36-38.
- Kaniuka, T. S., & Vickers, M. (2010). Lessons learned: How early college high schools offer a pathway for high school reform. *NASSP Bulletin*, 94(3), 165-183.
- Kuo, V. (2010). Transforming American high schools: Possibilities for the next phase of high school reform. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 85(3), 389-401. doi: 10.1080/0161956X.2010.491709
- Mulesman, M. (2015, May 19). The debt divide: The racial and class bias behind the 'new normal' of student borrowing. Retrieved from <http://www.demos.org/publication/debt-divide-racial-and-class-bias-behind-new-normal-student-borrowing>
- Overview & FAQs. (2013). Retrieved from <http://www.earlycolleges.org/overview.html>