

Early College Folio

The House of Education Needs Overhaul

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The Need for Early College in the 21st Century

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EDITORS' NOTE: *This is one of several responses to Elizabeth Blodgett Hall's "[The House of Education Needs Overhaul](#)." Hall was the founder and president emeritus of Bard College at Simon's Rock, the only full-time, four-year, residential college of the liberal arts and sciences designed for students ready for college after the 10th or 11th grade. Hall's article is published alongside these responses by early college leaders in this first issue of Early College Folio.*

INTRODUCTION

The ideas articulated in Elizabeth Hall's manifesto, "The House of Education Needs Overhaul: The Theory Behind Simon's Rock," though written over 50 years ago, are still very relevant today. Many of the challenges facing our educational system—or more accurately—systems, are ones that educators, policymakers, students, and parents are wrestling with today. Hall describes the American educational system of the mid-1960s as "a jerry-built affair, with floors or levels added haphazardly without regard for structural integrity" (1967, p. 1).

For those of us who have worked in recent years on issues related to the transition of students among the different levels of our educational system, we recognize that house quite well. Even though local, state, and federal governments, and nongovernmental organizations have embarked on many efforts to do a better job of articulation across the levels—particularly the transition from secondary school into postsecondary education—the system is still much less than thoughtfully designed and operated.

Numerous governmental agencies, think tanks, blue ribbon commissions, and the like have been created to address how the secondary and postsecondary systems can work better together. Over a dozen years ago I co-authored an article (McLendon et al., 2008) that examined high school to college transition policies, concluding that "The arena of high school to college transition policy represents one of the most active and dynamic areas of contemporary policy adoption and reform in the American states" (p. 413). A dozen years before that, President Bill Clinton, while campaigning for his second term, famously

pledged to “make the 13th and 14th years of education as universal to all Americans as the first 12 are today” (Pitsch, 1996) through a series of tax credits to help students pay for college. One current website, GettingSmart.com, lists 50 nonprofit and for-profit organizations that focus on improving the transition of students from high school to college (Getting Smart, 2021).

After his reelection, Clinton succeeded in acting on his campaign pledge. The HOPE and Lifetime Learning Tax Credits were created by Congress in 1997 and became effective in 1998. While the intent was noble, to provide funding for more students to attend college and to make the first two years of college as universal as elementary and secondary education, the country has made relatively little progress toward this goal. At the time of Clinton’s pledge in 1996, 65% of high school graduates went on to college by the fall after their graduation. The most recent data from the U.S. Department of Education show that in 2018 that number had reached only 69% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021b, table 302.10).

While this is only a modest gain, progress has been made on other fronts that has helped improve the secondary school to college pipeline. At the time of Clinton’s campaign pledge, 82% of American adults (25 years old and over) had at least a high school diploma; in 2019 this number reached 90%, thus increasing the pool of people eligible to enroll in postsecondary education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021b, table 104.10). And while postsecondary enrollment rates increased only marginally, college enrollment numbers increased more dramatically as the number of youth in the country has expanded, pushing total postsecondary enrollment (undergraduate and graduate combined) from 14.4 million 25 years ago to 19.7 million today, an increase of 37% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021b, table 303.10).

One thing most researchers and policymakers have concluded is that even given its limitations, one strength of the American educational system, especially as compared to those of other countries, is that it provides a diversity of pathways for students transitioning from high school to college. Most other developed countries have a much smaller proportion of their secondary school completers who enroll in college, and for most of the countries, it is a very rigid system with few alternative pathways. For example, in many countries, there is little of what we refer to in the United States as “adult learning” at the postsecondary level, and the only entry point to college is for 18-year-olds who have recently completed secondary school.¹

In the remainder of this article, I will provide my perspective on how the changes to the American educational system—those which have occurred since Elizabeth Hall wrote her manifesto—have impacted her call for an option for students who wish to enroll in college after the 10th grade, the opportunity that became Simon’s Rock,² and whether that opportunity is still needed today.

EARLY COLLEGE EXPERIENCES IN OUR EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM TODAY

One practice that has expanded greatly in the last 50 years is that of allowing secondary school students to earn college credit while still enrolled in high school. When Elizabeth Hall was writing, there were limited opportunities for high school students to take college-level courses, and when they did, it was generally accomplished by the student enrolling in and attending the college course through some form of special program.³

For example, some colleges offered summer programs for high school students in which students would come to the campus for a generally short session (one to four weeks) and have the opportunity to take a course or two. These types of programs benefited the institutions in multiple ways, including 1) by providing a revenue stream through tuition and residence hall fees, 2) by providing summer employment for faculty and graduate teaching assistants (and on occasion, undergraduates), and 3) by providing an opportunity for hands-on recruitment of those students who later may consider the institution when applying to college. The high school students benefited by gaining an experience with college-level work earlier in their educational careers, and they earned credits they could transfer to a postsecondary institution.

In recent years, opportunities for secondary school students to earn college credit have exploded. More and more colleges offer summer programs for high school students, often in partnership with third-party organizations that manage the recruitment and logistics of the programs. This includes among the most elite and selective higher education institutions in the country.⁴

Another form of pre-college experience that has exploded in recent years is dual enrollment, which allows students to take courses that provide both high school and college credit in the same course, usually offered on site at the student's high school and usually in partnership with a local community college. The U.S. Department of Education has been tracking dual enrollment sporadically over the last two decades. In the 2002-2003 school year, 812,700 high school students were enrolled in courses earning college credit, with 84% coming from dual enrollment programs and the remaining 16% enrolled directly in college-offered courses (Kleiner & Lewis, 2005). Just over three quarters of the students earned their credit through community colleges. The vast majority of these programs are operated at no direct tuition cost to the student or family.

By the 2010-2011 year, the number of high school students earning college credit increased by more than two-thirds to 1,363,500 students with 90% earning their credit through dual enrollment courses and 72% at community colleges (Marken et al., 2013). While the Department of Education has not issued a more recent study to confirm the rate is still rising, anecdotal evidence indicates that the trend has continued over the last decade.⁵

Why has there been so much interest in having high school students take college courses? The reasons generally cited by policymakers, practitioners, and researchers include:

- Early access to college courses gives students an opportunity to get a “taste for college” while still in high school—this is particularly true among those programs that allow secondary students to take the courses at a college.
- It provides an opportunity for bright, high-achieving students to take more challenging courses and keeps them engaged in their studies.
- And, it provides students the chance to earn college credits before formally enrolling in postsecondary education, thus improving the chances the student will persist through and complete a credential once enrolled in college.

It is this last rationale that has received the most attention from policymakers and researchers who study student college access and success. The positive impact of dual enrollment on postsecondary student success comes about because:

- students who start college with credits already earned need to earn fewer while in college, thus speeding up their time to degree;
- dual enrollment credits are generally earned at lower or zero cost, as compared to the cost while enrolled in college, so it lowers the cost of attaining a postsecondary credential; and
- students with some experience doing college-level work before enrolling in college have higher levels of success.

These benefits have been found to be greatest for groups who historically have been underenrolled in higher education, and have had the greatest odds of non-completion of a credential, including first-generation students, students of color, and low-income students.⁶

Another form of pre-college experience for high school students that has expanded in recent years is full-time early college high schools. This growth has been spurred in part by policymakers at the state level who have recognized the benefits of providing students with college credit while still in high school noted above. For example, the California legislature provided the opportunity for school districts to create early college high schools through passage of Chapter 14 of the state’s educational codes:

The Legislature finds and declares that early college high schools are innovative partnerships between charter or noncharter public secondary schools and a local community college, the California State University, or the University of California that allow pupils to earn a high school diploma and up to two years of college credit in four years or less. Early college high schools are small, autonomous schools that blend high school and college into a coherent educational program. In early college high schools, pupils begin taking college courses as soon as they demonstrate readiness and the college credit earned may be applied toward completing an associate or bachelor’s degree, transfer to a four-year university, or obtaining a skills certificate. (California Legislative Information, 2021)

Similar statutes can be found in other states that explicitly provide the opportunity and encouragement for school districts or charter schools to partner with postsecondary institutions to operate early college high schools.

The attraction of these programs is quite clear. A student entering an early college high school in the ninth grade can earn both her high school diploma as well as an associate's degree in four years. The student seeking a bachelor's degree would thus have only two years of additional full-time study required to attain that credential, assuming all of her associate's courses would allow her to enter the baccalaureate institution with junior standing. This would save the student time, and more importantly, money, since most state-sponsored early college high schools are funded by either state or local funds, or a combination of the two, at little or no cost to the student.

A variation on the early college high school model has been pioneered by Bard College, which in addition to its 42-year affiliation with Simon's Rock, has a network of seven early colleges⁷ in cities such as New York, Newark, Baltimore, and Cleveland. These non-residential institutions, collectively called Bard Early College, are offered in partnership with local school districts and offer students a high school diploma concurrent with college work from Bard that results in the awarding of an associate's degree at the end of four years. Like other similar programs, Bard Early College is tuition-free to its students.⁸

ELIZABETH HALL'S VISION TODAY

Given the expansion over the last 50 years of programs that seek to provide high school students with opportunities to earn college credit and live some aspects of the college experience as noted in the section above, the question arises of whether Elizabeth Hall's call for an "overhaul" of the American educational system is still relevant. There are certainly some indications that much of this overhaul has taken place already. For example, labor markets have changed in ways that demand more skills and credentials of workers, and in response to these demands, policymakers as well as nongovernmental organizations have shifted more of their focus to the need for better articulation between the secondary and postsecondary sectors.⁹ There have also been numerous calls for educational reform (primarily at the elementary and secondary levels), including a series of governmental and blue ribbon panels over the years that have provided roadmaps for these overhauls.

There are certainly some statistical indicators that this overhaul has resulted in a positive impact on students and educational attainment in the country. Table 1 shows some key educational metrics and how they have changed over time. All of them, important measures of success, have shown marked improvement over the last 25 or 50 years. For example, as noted earlier, the proportion of all adults with a high school diploma has increased almost two-thirds since

1970. Similarly, the proportion of young adults (age 25 to 29) with a bachelor's degree has more than doubled in just the last 25 years.

Table 1: Key Educational Indicators

INDICATOR	1970	2019	CHANGE
% of all adults (25 years-old and over) w/ HS diploma	55%	90%	64%
% of all adults (25 years-old and over) w/ at least a BA ^a degree	11%	36%	227%
% of young adults (age 25 to 29) w/ HS diploma	75%	94%	25%
% of young adults (age 25 to 29) w/ at least an AA ^a degree ^b	33%	49%	48%
% of young adults (age 25 to 29) w/ at least an BA ^a degree ^b	16%	39%	144%
% of high school completers enrolling in college the following fall ^c	52%	69%	33%

^a Though only BA and AA are listed above, this data includes all types of bachelor's and associate's degrees including BS, BFA, AS, AAA, and AAS

^b The base year is 1995, rather than 1970

^c The most recent year is 2018, rather than 2019

Source: National Center for Education Statistics (2021b, tables 104.10, 104.20, and 302.10)

While it is of course difficult to find a direct cause-and-effect relationship between any particular educational intervention and changes in any of these metrics, it is fair to conclude that the sum total of the changes we have made to the educational system in our country has had a positive impact. In addition, there is little doubt youth have read the labor market signals I described earlier; as they come to understand that the better-paying jobs, those we used to describe as “leading to a middle-class lifestyle,” require higher levels of education, they will respond on their own by seeking more education. But the educational system must be structured to provide them with the opportunities to do so in order for them to achieve success.

Even with the progress that has been made, how do we know if we have achieved a sufficient level of educational attainment to meet society's needs? Very few would argue, for example, that we should or need to strive for universal college attendance (though universal high school graduation is a goal that has been articulated and agreed to by most). Rather, conversations around college access generally focus on providing universal *opportunity* for college, e.g., a system that ensures that financial, geographic, academic, and other structural barriers should not prevent any student who wishes to take advantage of a postsecondary education from enrolling in college and achieving success once there.

One indicator that we have not yet reached the saturation point for college attendance is that even with the growth in the number of students attending college and earning degrees, the demand for college degrees in labor markets is still outstripping the supply. One 2018 analysis found that “Nine of out ten new

jobs created in the last year have gone to those with a college degree, a finding showing the American economy's growing reliance on a trained workforce as well as the changing demographics of the country" (Goldstein, 2018).

Another important indicator that we still have progress to make is that even though overall educational participation and attainment rates have grown, there are still stubborn gaps in participation among students from different groups. Data from the U.S. Department of Education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021b, table 302.20) show that in 2018, while 71% of white high school graduates and 74% of Asian-American graduates enrolled in college the fall following high school, only 65% of Black and Hispanic graduates did. Similar gaps persist across income groups. In 2016, 83% of high school graduates from high-income families enrolled in college, while 65% of students from both middle- and low-income families did (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021b, table 302.30).

So given this context of, on one hand, progress in educational participation and attainment, and yet on the other, clear problem areas that still require societal response, is Elizabeth Hall's vision for an institution like Simon's Rock still needed today? An easy answer to that question could be: *anything that helps increase levels of postsecondary participation and attainment, and has been successful in doing so, should be part of our educational ecosystem.* A more nuanced answer requires an understanding of the nature of the Simon's Rock educational model. As noted in the prior section, there are numerous early college programs around the country, and they have been expanding over time. So what additional contribution can be made by a small (fewer than 400 students) institution in a rural corner of the country?

One important characteristic of Simon's Rock is that it is one of the few residential early college program in the nation.¹⁰ The vast majority of programs do not provide an option for students to live on a college campus and take full advantage of both the curricular and co-curricular experience normally available to residential college students. And the importance of the residential experience, and all it entails, has been well documented in the research literature about what contributes to college student persistence and success.¹¹ Students are much more likely to be successful in college when they are engaged not just in their studies, but in the institution more broadly. Living on campus, participating in clubs, sports, and other activities, engaging with faculty inside and outside of the classroom, etc., have all been shown in the research to be important promoters of persistence and degree attainment. And yet Simon's Rock is the only stand-alone, residential early college institution in the country.

Simon's Rock has also demonstrated success in graduating its students. Nationally, the 6-year graduation rate for all baccalaureate institutions in the country is 60% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021b, table 326.10). The rate at Simon's Rock is 69% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021a),¹² an impressive accomplishment when one takes into account the fact that most

Simon's Rock students arrive at the institution when they are only 16 years old and having completed sophomore year of high school.

The Simon's Rock experience, and that of similarly-structured residential early colleges, provides an educational experience that is not duplicated by programs that offer college courses either in the high school, or for students who commute to a college for course instruction only, or by a short-term summer program on a college campus. While some of these other types of programs may have components that attempt to provide some of these co-curricular activities, none of them can provide the rich, intensive experience provided by residential college education.

Bard College at Simon's Rock at its founding was unique, and a pioneer in providing a residential early college experience. While it is no longer the only institution of its type, it is part of what is still a very small group that provides this alternative to traditional postsecondary educational institutions educating upwards of 20 million students each year in our country. This alternative should remain available to the kind of students Simon's Rock has served for over 50 years, and should be a model for the development of similar programs across the country.

DR. DONALD HELLER is Vice President of Operations and a professor of education at the University of San Francisco. His teaching and research have been influenced by his status as a first generation college student, and are in the areas of educational economics, public policy, and finance, with a primary focus on issues of college access, choice, and success for low-income and minority students. He has consulted on higher education policy issues with university systems and policymaking organizations in California, Colorado, Florida, Kansas, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Hampshire, Tennessee, Washington, Washington DC, and West Virginia, and has testified in front of Congressional committees, state legislatures, and in federal court cases as an expert witness.

Dr. Heller has published over 175 articles, book chapters and other publications, and his research has appeared in numerous scholarly journals. He is editor or co-editor of six books, including: *Student Financing of Higher Education: A Comparative Perspective* (with C. Callender, Routledge, 2013), *The States and Public Higher Education Policy: Affordability, Access, and Accountability* (Johns Hopkins University Press, second edition, 2011), and *Generational Shockwaves and the Implications for Higher Education* (with M. d'Ambrosio, Edward Elgar, 2009). Dr. Heller served as a member of Simon's Rock Board of Overseers from 2015-2016, and has been a member of the Board of Trustees of DePaul University since 2012.

NOTES

- 1 For a comparison across countries, see Heller and Callendar (2013).
- 2 Later renamed Bard College at Simon's Rock, when the original institution affiliated with Bard College in 1979.
- 3 I was one of the rare students who did this; as a high school senior in the 1970s, I enrolled in an economics course at a nearby college during the fall of my senior year under a program that allowed local secondary school students to do so.
- 4 One organization, [Summer Discovery](#), lists partnerships with such schools as UCLA, Yale, Johns Hopkins University, the universities of Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Texas, and even Cambridge University in the UK.
- 5 For example, Texas reports that the number of dual enrollment students increased 753% from 2000 to 2017 (Field, 2020).
- 6 For examples of these findings, see Field (2020) and Hughes, Rodriguez, Edwards and Belfield (2012).
- 7 As of June 2021, Bard Early Colleges are located at seven Bard High School Early Colleges (BHSECs): Manhattan, Queens, Newark, Cleveland, Cleveland East, Baltimore, and Washington D. C. Five additional early colleges and academies exist in the Bard Early College network as well, including Bard Academy and Bard College at Simon's Rock.
- 8 For more on the Bard program, see <https://bhsec.bard.edu/>.
- 9 For an excellent overview of how education has changed in response to these labor market demands, see Murnane and Levy (1996).
- 10 A compendium of early college programs operated exclusively by post-secondary institutions maintained by the Center for Talented Youth at Johns Hopkins University (2021) lists only seven other higher education institutions that operate residential early college programs, and some of these are restricted by residence, gender, or other characteristics.
- 11 The best review and analysis of this literature is found in Mayhew, Rockebach, Bowman, Seifert, Wolniak, Pascarella, and Terenzini (2016).
- 12 The Simon's Rock graduation rate, confirmed by the Director of Institutional Research, relates to the Associate of Arts degree. Bachelor of Arts graduation rates are based on the number of graduating AA students who matriculate into the BA program; this most recent rate is 85%.

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