

Early College Folio

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Review

A Guide to Early College and Dual Enrollment Programs: Designing and Implementing Programs for Achievement

by Russ Olwell

(New York: Routledge, 2021)

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While Dual Enrollment has been in the national conversation for more than 50 years, only recently have Early College programs begun to enjoy the same prominence. In fact, they are beginning to proliferate, with over 300 such programs now in existence in the United States. In my home state of Massachusetts, there are 24 institutes of higher education and 51 high schools across 39 Early College programs that have received a state designation, with eight of those programs receiving designation status in just the past year. There are some resources available for administrators who are planning to launch a new program, like the Rennie Center's 2019 "[Early College Blueprint](#)", or "[A Policymaker's Guide to Early College Designs](#)" by Nancy Hoffman and Joel Vargas at [Jobs For the Future](#), but there is a clear need for more. A welcome addition to the literature, *A Guide to Early College and Dual Enrollment Programs* is an accessible collection of research and practical advice for current or future Early College leaders who are looking to begin or expand a program.

The book is structured into four sections: creating powerful programs, supporting and engaging students, the broader impact of early college and dual enrollment programs, and building sustainable programs. Each subsection contains a helpful "Resource Toolbox," listing items for further reference. The first section begins with a history of Dual Enrollment and Early College (an Early College program is defined to award 12 or more credits, to take place on a college campus, and to have a student support element, while a Dual Enrollment program is defined to award fewer than 12 credits or to take place on a high school campus), as well as a description of the benefits—to students and institutions—of an Early College program. The focus then turns to administrative setup: one should have a steering committee, a memorandum of understanding, a budget, built-in student support, and special milestones for students. This feels somewhat abstract, and yet focused enough that it's clear the advice is written by someone with experience. Regarding steering

committees, Olwell writes that “. . . the group needs to contain the minimum number of decision makers needed to address the problems that the program will run into during the year” (21). After spending quite a bit of time in such meetings, I couldn’t agree more.

The second section is the book’s most substantive, and rightfully so. Olwell quickly identifies a central issue: “Among the toughest challenges for Early College and Dual Enrollment programs is to be able to reach out to students who will benefit the most” (42) and to help them locate and navigate academic help and support. To help support this, Olwell includes reflections from students, teachers, and administrators in addition to clearly identifying “soft skills” (46) that can be taught and are essential to success. He emphasizes the importance of working with families and building a clear connection to further college work or a career. The section closes with discussions, including case studies and advice from students and teachers, on supporting students through work in STEM and Social Sciences. Student support is a critical feature any successful program, and Olwell really shines in this area.

A fundamental issue with a practically focused guide such as this one is the variegated nature of Dual Enrollment and Early College programs. If each one must be carefully crafted, attendant to the needs of the local community, is it worthwhile to give universal advice? Administrative teams want to avoid reinventing the wheel, but the devil remains, as always, in the details. Olwell threads this needle by providing plenty of examples, giving helpful advice and reflections from administrators, students, and faculty. There’s a certain amount of comfort involved in hearing that some challenges really are universal. When Olwell mentions that “early college scheduling is simply a grinding nightmare” (32) I felt the warmth of a kindred spirit. Still, the expert advice, like “opening up strong lines of communication and checking in often is imperative for the success of the program” (33) from Meredith Fitzsimmons and a note from Stacey Ciprich that “scheduling is the key to Early College success” (33), while useful, is not exactly unexpected. This book contains a phenomenal list of challenges faced by new programs, and some broad guidance on how to solve them, but the grinding nightmare of implementation is an exercise left for the reader.

The final two sections focus on the broader community impact of an Early College program and ways in which such a program may find funding. Programs need substantive investment to be successful, and funders, like school boards (or, as we say here in Massachusetts, school committees), private donors, and philanthropic organizations will want evidence that these programs work. As Early College programs around the country begin to mature, there is a growing body of evidence in support of their efficacy. Olwell certainly points out the research, but also makes a defense of these programs as a vital and important part of the community.

Olwell has done a magnificent job of identifying the key challenges in implementing an Early College program and the reason why such programs can be so successful: they relentlessly focus on student support, adapt to the needs of their student populations, and actively work within their communities. For anyone interested in creating or growing an Early College or Dual Enrollment program, or working in student support, this is a worthwhile read.

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