

**Expanding Access, Increasing Participation:
Post-Secondary Educational Opportunities During High School**

*Interim Report of the Governor's Task Force on Expanding Early Post-Secondary
Access for High School Students in Maine*

January 2012

I. The Challenge

As educators and policymakers in Maine search for strategies to increase high school completion, post-secondary enrollment and degree program completion, one strategy that shows significant promise is to offer more Maine students the chance to enroll in post-secondary classes while still in high school.

Recent research by the Sen. George J. Mitchell Scholarship Research Institute (2008, 2011) shows that Maine high school students who take courses for college credit during high school are more likely than their counterparts to enroll in two- and four-year degree programs following graduation. In fact, the Mitchell Institute research shows that after participation in early post-secondary training, students without previous intentions of enrolling in two- or four-year degree programs are more likely to pursue degrees. Plus, students who earn college credit during high school enroll in college with a financial advantage: They don't have to pay tuition for the credits they have already earned.

The Mitchell Institute research also shows a general pattern of growth in recent years in early post-secondary participation among Maine's high school students. During the 2010-11 academic year, Maine high school students enrolled in 1,796 college-level courses, compared to 1,022 courses five years earlier. More than 90 percent of Maine high schools allow their students the chance to take such classes for both college and high school credit, according to the Mitchell Institute (2011).

Despite this increased access and participation, not enough students are completing high school, enrolling and succeeding in post-secondary education, and attaining degrees that allow them to find work in sectors of the state's economy where their skills are needed.

Approximately 80 percent of Maine students graduate from high school in four years, placing Maine above the national average for high school completion. However, only about 65 percent of them enroll in some form of post-secondary education.

Of those students who matriculate at Maine's public universities and community colleges, a substantial percentage must enroll in remedial courses to reach the level of proficiency they should have attained in high school. At the University of Maine system, about a quarter of incoming students need at least one remedial course. At the Maine Community College System, 51 percent of students need courses to catch them up in subjects like math, reading and writing.

The high levels of remediation belie low college completion rates. Within six years of enrolling, only 48 percent of those who start work on a University of Maine System bachelor's degree earn the credential. Just 26 percent of Maine students who start work on an associate's degree earn it within three years.

Unfortunately, too few Maine students are successfully completing any sort of post-secondary training just as a growing number of Maine jobs require such preparation. By 2018, almost 60 percent of the state's jobs will require post-secondary education, according to an analysis by the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce (2010). But today, just 36 percent of Maine's population 25 and older has an associate's degree or higher, according to U.S. Census data.

That means Maine must bridge a significant skills gap, especially if the state is to reach the goal set forth by the Maine Compact for Higher Education (2010) that, by 2020, 56 percent of the state's working-age population will have a college degree.

An expansion of post-secondary opportunities for, and participation among, Maine high school students is part of the solution. But while participation in early college opportunities has generally grown in recent years, not all indicators are positive.

Mitchell Institute research shows that participation in early college peaked during the 2007-08 school year, when Maine high school students enrolled in 2,133 college-level courses. The decline in participation since 2007-08 corresponds with shrinking school district budgets and fewer available grant funds to pay for high school students' enrollment in post-secondary courses.

II. The Charge

On July 28, 2011, Gov. Paul LePage issued an executive order forming the "Governor's Task Force on Expanding Early Post-Secondary Access for High School Students in Maine." The Governor's executive order called for a 19-member task force with broad representation from the state's higher education and K-12 education communities as well as the Maine Department of Education and the Maine State Legislature.

The executive order articulated the following charge for the task force:

"The purpose of the task force is to develop recommendations for short-term and long-term solutions to expand access to early post-secondary opportunities for Maine's high school students. The task force must identify existing barriers to access and provide recommendations for removing those barriers and for expanding access to early post-secondary opportunities, including necessary implementing legislation.

"The duties of the task force include, but are not limited to:

- "a. Undertaking a survey of Maine's high schools and colleges to determine the existing availability of early post-secondary opportunities in Maine's high schools;
- b. Reviewing the various approaches by which early post-secondary opportunities are made available to students;

- c. Reviewing the research related to early post-secondary opportunities for high school students in other states and internationally, to include how such opportunities are funded; and
- d. Developing short-term and long-term solutions to expand access to early post-secondary opportunities for Maine's high school students, to include recommendations for how such opportunities may be funded within existing resources."

Gov. LePage formally appointed the Task Force members on Sept. 19, 2011.

III. What the Task Force Did

The Task Force met four times during the fall of 2011 to learn about existing opportunities for Maine high school students to enroll in post-secondary courses while earning both high school and college credit, review data on participation in early post-secondary classes, identify barriers preventing greater participation in such programs and begin forming recommendations in response to the charge. The group met on Sept. 30, Oct. 31, Nov. 18 and Dec. 6.

On Sept. 30, Task Force members reviewed the executive order creating the group and heard presentations about two regional examples of early post-secondary programs already operating or beginning to operate in Maine.

Scott Voisine of the University of Maine at Fort Kent discussed the pilot year of the Fort Kent area's Early College High School, which places 20 Fort Kent Community High School students on the University of Maine at Fort Kent campus and exposes them to college-level work, allows them to earn both college and high school credit, and offers them support to facilitate the transition. By its third year, organizers expect the Early College High School will enroll 150 students from a number of high schools in the St. John Valley.

Dwight Littlefield of the Maine Department of Education gave a presentation on the "Bridge Year" project, a new and evolving initiative that aligns classes at Hermon High School, United Technologies Center in Bangor, Eastern Maine Community College and the University of Maine to create a clear pathway that allows a participating student to earn a community college associate's degree within a year of completing high school and continue his or her education at the University of Maine. The program expects to enroll 16 students in its pilot year.

On Oct. 31, Task Force members discussed existing statewide early college initiatives and looked at data on barriers to access.

Harry Osgood of the Maine Department of Education spoke about the Aspirations program, which offers high school students taking early college courses a substantial tuition discount with the help of dedicated funds from the Maine Department of Education and participating college campuses. Data from the Maine Department of Education indicated that 653 students were enrolled in the Aspirations program during the spring of 2011. Joan Macri, of College for ME

Androscoggin, discussed the work she does coordinating early college enrollments and registrations with eight public high schools and six partner colleges in Androscoggin County.

Charles Collins of the Maine Community College System discussed the Early College for ME program that allows students undecided about pursuing a college degree the opportunity to take community college courses during their senior year of high school, support through the college admissions and financial aid process, and Maine Community College System scholarships.

Since its start in 2003, Early College for ME has served more than 5,200 Maine high school students. More than 1,600 of them have received Early College for ME scholarships and later matriculated at a campus within the Maine Community College System. A thousand more students enrolled at other colleges after participating in Early College for ME. Currently, the program engages 1,700 high school students each year and offers college placement testing, academic advising, and support in college planning and completing financial aid applications. The program offers these services through 69 high schools and five Career and Technical Education centers throughout the state.

Also at the Oct. 31 task force meeting, David Patterson of the Maine Department of Education discussed AP4ALL, a Department program that allows students to take online Advanced Placement courses for free. During the 2009-10 school year, AP4ALL recorded 187 enrollments in 14 AP courses. That year, 65 percent of AP4ALL participants scored “3” or greater on their respective AP exams, compared to 60 percent nationally. Colleges generally require an AP score of at least “3” before awarding a student course credit.

Lastly, on Oct. 31, Lisa Plimpton of the Mitchell Institute discussed that group’s research into early college barriers, access and opportunities for Maine high school students.

On Nov. 18, Angela Dostie of the Finance Authority of Maine discussed a potential funding source for marketing early post-secondary opportunities: the College Access Challenge Grant, which is awarded to entities that design plans to reach out to underrepresented students and encourage them to pursue post-secondary degrees.

David Connerty-Marin of the Maine Department of Education presented the results of the Task Force’s survey of most Maine high schools regarding the early college opportunities available to their students. The Department of Education requested that principals and/or guidance counselors at all Maine high schools complete the survey; 104 of about 130 public high schools in the state responded. Also at the Nov. 18 meeting, Wendy Ault of the MELMAC Education Foundation discussed that foundation’s work with respect to broadening early post-secondary opportunities.

And a group of Maine guidance counselors discussed the pros and cons of various approaches to early college.

The Task Force devoted its Dec. 6 meeting to discussing barriers to early post-secondary access, potential solutions and preliminary recommendations for the group's report to the Governor and the Legislature's Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs.

IV. What the Task Force Discovered: Barriers to Greater Access

Through a review of existing research, presentations on existing opportunities and fresh survey data of their own, Task Force members discovered that opportunities for, participation in and commitment to early post-secondary opportunities are already common. The vast majority of high schools allow their students to enroll in and receive dual credit for early college courses, and the vast majority of colleges in Maine – public and private – cooperate with high schools to offer such opportunities.

Task Force survey data also show that high schools are pleased with the quality of college courses taken by their students, and that their educators don't hesitate to suggest early college opportunities to their students when they feel it's appropriate. Plus, when high school students enroll in early college courses, they can largely count on additional support from their high schools to help them through the experience.

However, despite the opportunities available, it was clear to the Task Force that significant barriers remain. In its work, the Task Force came to organize barriers into five broad categories:

- **Transportation and scheduling.** While a number of early post-secondary opportunities are available to Maine' high school students, being able to actually get students to those programs, which involves overcoming scheduling and transportation issues, has proven to be a challenge. Research by the Mitchell Institute, which was confirmed by the Task Force's own survey, found that the combination of scheduling conflicts and transportation issues – how to actually get students to early post-secondary opportunities on college campuses – represent significant barriers.
- **Funding.** Whether it is funding for schools and colleges to offer early post-secondary programs, funding for students to cover books and fees, or funding for educator training and support, the Task Force saw a lack of funding as another significant barrier. Schools and colleges have a number of early college programs in place, but the sustainability of such programs in the face of continuing budget pressures is uncertain.

- **School and district capacity.** While there are early post-secondary opportunities available across Maine, the Task Force heard repeatedly that schools and school districts lack sufficient capacity to provide adequate and consistent help to students in accessing these opportunities. Because there exists no central repository for information on early college opportunities, guidance counselors and other school and district leaders report being overwhelmed by the various application requirements and deadlines, with the result that access to programs is uneven at best.
- **Access to program information.** One of the effects of the lack of state, school, and district capacity to manage access to early college programs is that information about such programs is hard for school officials and students to come by. Early college opportunities might be more widely accessed if more information about such opportunities was made available.
- **Policy barriers.** The Task Force also investigated the degree to which there may be state, school or college policies in place that form barriers, intentional or not, to early college opportunities.

V. Recommendations for Addressing Barriers

The Task Force devoted only a single meeting to developing strategies to overcoming the barriers it identified, and as such, the panel's first recommendation is that it continue its efforts into the coming year, in order to more fully analyze and address the issues its work identified.

- **Recommendation 1: That the Task Force, which, under the governor's Executive Order was to have been dissolved upon the completion of this report, continue to meet regularly. The Task Force should move next to developing and implementing an action agenda for each of the issues areas it identified.**

Transportation and Scheduling

Task Force members developed the following set of suggestions to pursue in an attempt to resolve scheduling and transportation conflicts:

Make better use of existing education infrastructure. As Maine's Career and Technical Education (CTE) centers are already in place as regional educational facilities serving all Maine high schools, it makes sense to build upon this existing structure as a means of expanding access to early college opportunities. Transportation is already provided to regional CTE centers, for instance, which makes them a logical place to provide early college opportunities. The CTE centers could also serve as regional hubs for transportation to nearby college campuses.

- **Recommendation 2: That CTE centers work in collaboration with nearby institutions of higher education to pilot the use of CTE facilities as potential access points for early college opportunities.**

Expand the number of dual enrollment courses. Transportation and scheduling conflicts become less of an issue if early college opportunities are offered in a high school setting. Data from the survey conducted by the Task Force revealed that the clear majority of respondents thought offering early college opportunities on high school campuses was critical to expanding access to such opportunities. Additionally, dual enrollment courses alleviate many scheduling issues, as students receive both high school and college credit for courses taken.

- **Recommendation 3: School districts should work collaboratively with nearby higher education institutions to expand the number of dual enrollment courses they offer.**

Make better use of dates and times outside the normal school day and year. While scheduling conflicts exist during the regular school day and year, colleges reported to the Task Force that summer and late afternoon/evening programming have proven to be effective ways of meeting the scheduling needs of students, especially non-traditional students who may be balancing work and family obligations. While there are costs associated with keeping school buildings open later in the day and year, new approaches to maximizing the use of available facilities should be explored.

- **Recommendation 4: School districts should work with nearby colleges and regional CTE centers to explore additional scheduling options.**

Expand access to online and other digital learning options. Digital learning allows a student to take courses at a time, place and pace that is most convenient for him or her. While digital learning options already exist, access to them is uneven, with some schools and colleges offering courses and others not. In a rural state like Maine, online learning can mean the difference between having access to an educational opportunity and having no access to such opportunities at all. Therefore, significant work should be done to expand digital learning options for students across Maine.

- **Recommendation 5: The state Department of Education should work with Maine's institutions of higher education to expand access to online and digital learning options.**

Funding

The Task Force returned a number of times to the issue of funding, both to support early college programming and to assist students and families with costs such as books and fees. While the Task Force explored ideas such as building private sector partnerships, the panel concluded that significant additional investigation needed to be undertaken to identify potential sources of funding for these programs. As noted in Recommendation 1 above, the Task Force suggests that its work on this and other issues continue.

- **Recommendation 6: The Task Force should focus a significant portion of its proposed future work on identifying potential sources of funding for early college programs.**

School and District Capacity

From its very first meeting, the Task Force identified school and district capacity as a significant issue. Task Force member Scott Voisine suggested in his presentation on the early college pilot program in Fort Kent that having dedicated staff working to coordinate that program was key to getting it up and running.

The Task Force's investigation also found, however, that budget pressures in recent years have made it extraordinarily difficult for schools and districts to free up personnel to coordinate these programs.

The Task Force suggested, however, that regional solutions ought to be investigated. It might be possible, for instance, for districts sharing a CTE center to support regional personnel, based at the CTE centers, who can coordinate regional early college programs. In this way, districts can ensure that someone is coordinating these programs, and the cost to each individual district is minimal.

- **Recommendation 7: School districts should investigate using regional CTE center staff to assist in coordinating access to early college opportunities.**

It also became clear to the Task Force that schools and school districts could be helped immeasurably in their work to coordinate access to early college programs if information about such programs were more readily available from a single source. For example, guidance counselors reported to the Task Force that even if they know early college programs exist, they struggle to find information about admissions criteria and enrollment procedures.

The Task Force came to conclude that the state would be well served if a single website were developed to contain, in a centralized place, information about all

early college opportunities. The site should be designed to serve as a resource for school officials, parents and students alike.

- **Recommendation 8: The state Department of Education should lead an effort to gather information on early college opportunities and post that information on a single, user-friendly website.**

Access to Program Information

The development of a single website on early college programs, as suggested above, would go a long way toward providing schools and families with needed information on such programs, but the Task Force determined that far more is needed in terms of marketing and outreach. Among the Task Force's suggestions:

- A major early college marketing campaign should be launched, independently of any school or college. The new website would be the central feature of this effort.
- A special effort should be made through this marketing campaign and website to engage first-generation college students and students without prior plans to pursue post-secondary education.
- The marketing campaign should appeal to parents, so they start asking their children's high schools about their early college offerings.
- Special efforts should be made to reach out to high school guidance counselors so they are aware of the full scope of opportunities available to their students.
- Just as outreach is made to educate guidance counselors, other school staff members should be made aware of early post-secondary opportunities, so information isn't confined to the guidance office.
- When students attend classes on a college campus, they need access to the same information as incoming, full-time students regarding the support services available to them on campus.
- Annual college fairs in each region present an opportunity to advertise early college opportunities directly to students.

In summary, a broad information and marketing campaign should be launched to expand awareness of early college opportunities. The Task Force, in its ongoing work, should continue to explore how such an effort could be undertaken.

- **Recommendation 9: The Task Force should work to develop an outreach and marketing strategy, complete with an implementation plan. The Task Force should set a goal of having the proposed website and other components of the marketing plan in place by the start of the 2012-2013 school year.**

Policy Barriers

Several times during the Task Force's deliberations, it became clear that there may be various policies of one kind or another in place at the school, college or state level that form barriers to enrollment in early college programs. For instance, there may be barriers created by state teacher certification laws or school transportation and bussing policies. Colleges or school districts may have policies that award school or college credit for early college courses but not both, which complicates student schedules and discourages early college course taking.

As with other aspects of its work, however, the Task Force did not have the time in its four meetings to explore these policy issues in depth. If the Task Force's work is to continue, as recommended elsewhere in this report, further investigation of policy barriers should be a top priority.

- **Recommendation 10: The Task Force, in its continuing work, should focus on reviewing school, district, college and state policies that may create barriers to access for early college programs. The Task Force should produce a follow-up report with suggestions for policymakers at all levels.**

VI. Conclusion

While the Task Force has put forward a series of recommendations as required by the Executive Order, additional work on this complex set of issues is required, thus the recommendation that the Task Force continue its work. Among the top priorities of the Task Force moving forward are the following:

- Continue to review existing early college programs and report on their outcomes.
- Investigate existing and potential sources of sustainable funding for early college programming.
- Review potential barriers created by policies at the school, district, college and state level.
- Work with stakeholders to create a plan for the development of a statewide outreach and marketing strategy, including development of a statewide early college website.

The Task Force will also continue to investigate the concept of the "five-year high school." As this model was implemented in North Carolina, high schools were

constructed on Community College campuses to provide ready access to enough early college opportunities that students there were able to complete a high school diploma and an Associate's Degree in five years of high school.

Constructing new high schools on the campuses of Maine's Community College system is almost certainly unfeasible, but efforts to expand access to early college opportunities for all students will invariably result in students leaving high school with multiple college credits. Students who are part of the Pleasant Street Academy early college program in Fort Kent, for example, will ultimately graduate from Fort Kent high school with a year or more of college credit.

Moving forward, the Task Force will make it a top priority to investigate ways that expanding the number of dual-credit courses and working with Maine's institutions of higher education to better align coursework and credit transfers could make the five-year high school a reality in every high school in Maine.

In conclusion, the Task Force is pleased to submit this report, but wishes to emphasize once again that early college programming is a complex issue, or rather a complex series of interlocking issues, and that a great deal of continued work needs to be done if the state is to make significant progress in expanding access to these opportunities. The Task Force remains committed to the issue of early college programming, and looks forward to the work ahead.

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