



## Early College High School Initiative

# Teaching Early College High School at LaGuardia Community College

*By Marcia Glick*

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*From coast to coast and border to border, the Middle College National Consortium, one of thirteen partner organizations in the Early College High School Initiative, is collaborating with schools, districts, and colleges to create 30 middle college-early college high schools. To date, 17 of these schools are operating on college campuses in New York, Michigan, California, Tennessee, South Carolina, Colorado, and Kentucky, with additional sites expected in Michigan, New York, Texas, and Chicago.*

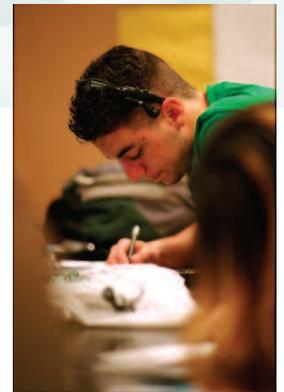
*Middle college-early college high schools target students who have traditionally been underserved by the public schools, particularly students who are unmotivated, underprepared for high school work, and disengaged from their education. The schools provide structured, institutionally integrated opportunities and supports for all students to earn an Associate's degree or 60 transferable college credits within five or fewer years of starting high school.*

It is a hot summer morning in late June 2002, the first day of summer session at LaGuardia Community College, a two-year college in the City University of New York. I am looking at twenty-two students, and they at me. Shawn is seated in the front row, notebook ready, three pens on his desk, looking around. Tatiana, in the second row, is smiling. On her desk lie a bottle of water, her class schedule, a pen with a small American flag attached, and her cell phone. Jorge is seated in the last row, his baseball cap almost covering his face. He is talking to the student next to him. He smiles at me and I smile back. They are all about to have their first college experience.

The beginning of a semester is always a challenge, but this session was something out of the ordinary. The students in my class were not the typical LaGuardia freshmen I had taught for many years in Essentials of Reading II (CSE099). They were third-year high school students enrolled in the Early College High School Initiative at LaGuardia Community College.

Originally called the Excel program, the initiative allows students to take college courses while attending one of the two early college high schools on the LaGuardia campus: the International High School or the Middle College High School. Early college is an accelerated program leading to a combined high school diploma and an Associate's degree in five years. The educational goals of this initiative are to minimize the barriers between high school and college; to ease the transition from secondary to postsecondary school; to prepare the students for and attract them to higher education, and to increase the high school graduation rates.

Not only does this initiative allow secondary school students to take classes on a college campus, it also offers them access to the entire campus and all of its facilities. It is an opportunity for them to learn first-hand the responsibilities and rewards of being a college student. It enables them to connect the here and now (taking both college and high school courses) with the future ("what I want to do after I graduate?"). Early college high school adolescents



are treated as adults, with the responsibilities associated with a college student. They interact academically and socially with the college population; it is an exceptional opportunity to have a real-life college experience.

In 2002 I began a four-year partnership with the Early College High School Initiative. I had a number of questions about the viability of including secondary students in the postsecondary classroom. Could high school adolescents adapt to the college environment? Would they be able to “fit in” and become college freshmen? Would the level at which the course is taught have to be changed, that is, would the academic standards have to be lowered to meet the needs of the early college high school population? Would there be an “age gap” between the early college high school and the LaGuardia student that might present difficulties for social interaction and a collaborative working partnership? Questions, but no answers as yet.

The first early college high school cohort of 2002 that I taught were not enrolled in classes that included LaGuardia students. However, other early college high school classes in 2002 were mainstreamed with LaGuardia students. My classes consisted entirely of early college high school students from one of the two high schools on campus. I decided that the structure, format, and syllabus of the course would remain unchanged. The early college high school students would be required to meet and satisfy the same standards as those set for the LaGuardia student. Would the Excel cohort of 2002 (as well as 2003, 2004, and 2005) meet the challenge?

By the end of the first semester, some of my concerns were answered. The students in the 2002 cohort proved that they were ready and willing to do what was expected of them in the Essentials of Reading II course. They were attentive, maintained a high level of class participation, and were cooperative. The more work I assigned, the more they did. They never complained, they never missed an assignment, never missed a class or lab session. All 22 students submitted their term paper projects on time, and several even ahead of the due date! Their diligence and the quality of work surprised (and pleased) me. The entire group of 22 students not

only passed the Essentials of Reading II course but also achieved a 100 percent passing rate on the ACT examination, a high-stakes examination required by the City University of New York.

Did this resolve my concerns about secondary school students meeting college course requirements? Almost . . . but not quite. I remained skeptical. Was this cohort a true representative sample of early college high school cohorts to come, or was this group a fortunate aberration? Would the early college high school students at LaGuardia continue to excel?

The cohort of 2003 was a determined group of 23 students, again not mainstreamed. When asked to define academic success they stated that success would mean passing this course, passing the ACT examination, and gaining the reading skills to help them through other content-area college courses. Their passing rate on both the ACT examination and the Essentials of Reading course was 83 percent, which clearly demonstrated a strong work ethic and ambition to succeed.

A key contributing factor toward the success of the 2002 and 2003 cohorts was the support they received from their early college high school. They attended seminars about study skills and received counseling and tutorial services, all of which contributed to their academic achievement.

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In 2004 early college high school students were enrolled in classes that included LaGuardia students. In two of my courses, Essentials of Reading II and Reading the Biography, about half of the students were in their third year of early college high school. The other half were LaGuardia students ranging in age from 18 (recent high school graduates) to returning adult learners, as old as 40 years of age. The possibility did exist that a maturational or emotional gap between the two groups could affect their ability to work collaboratively and cooperatively. If this gap did exist, would it diminish the learning and teaching environment?



In Reading the Biography, early college high school students had no difficulty communicating and working collaboratively with the LaGuardia students (regardless of age) in small groups. When each group presented their end-of-term projects, the early college high school students actively participated in both the planning and execution of the presentations. Two computer-based group projects were led by early college high school students. They enthusiastically participated in class discussions, they freely offered their perspectives and opinions on issues, and they challenged classmates, at times with their own views on the material being discussed. If an emotional gap existed between the two groups of students in this class, it was neither apparent, nor did it hinder either their collaborative efforts or interaction in class.

The early college high school students of 2004 and 2005 continued to maintain a high rate of success in class and on the ACT examination. However, not all of these students were prepared for college-level courses. Some students in each early college high school cohort did have academic difficulty in either Essentials of Reading II or Reading the Biography. Some required individualized help to get through the course. Others had to repeat Essentials of Reading II, not because of a lack of effort but because of skill deficiencies. At this time, there is no placement examination administered to entering high school students to determine the appropriate reading course for the student. All early college high school students are placed directly into the higher-level course. However, it is apparent that some of the students would benefit

by taking Essentials of Reading I first, and, if successful, moving on to Essentials of Reading II.

The majority of the early college high school students met the course requirements. They were motivated to achieve passing grades and were well aware of the educational opportunity they were being given to save both time and tuition. (There is no cost to the students for the early college high school program, whether for high school courses or college-level courses.) Early college high school students in the college classroom wanted to be viewed as college students, not as high school students taking college courses. They knew they had to work hard, sometimes harder, than LaGuardia students. The results speak to their efforts (see Table 1).

In each early college high school cohort from 2002 through 2005, a high percentage of students successfully completed the course requirements,

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**Table 1: Statistical Overview of Early College High School Students Enrolled in Essentials of Reading II, LaGuardia Community College, 2002–2005**

Cohort	Number of Students	Passed Course	Passed ACT	Passing Grade Range on ACT Exam
2005	24	22 (92%)	18 (75%)	67-92
2004	23	20 (87%)	19 (83%)	65-93
2003	23	19 (83%)	20 (87%)	65-89
2002	22	22 (100%)	22 (100%)	67-94

passed the department final examination, and received a passing grade in the course. Each cohort also exceeded the LaGuardia average score of 59 percent for the ACT examination with 75 percent, 83 percent, 87 percent, and 100 percent respectively passing the ACT. Many of the early college high school students passed the ACT examination with scores that exceeded the required 65 percent and would still be considered passing when the passing rate for this examination rose to 70 percent in fall 2005. In Reading the Biography, 12 of the 21 students were in one of the early college high schools. Of these 21, 10 passed (83 percent) with grades of A, B or C, and 2 (17 percent) received a grade of D. Of the 9 non-early college high school students, 6 passed (67 percent) with grades of A, B, and C, and two (33 percent) failed.

After four years and four early college high school cohorts, some prevailing facts about these students have become apparent. First, most of these students have a strong work ethic and a "can-do" attitude toward school. They meet the challenges presented in the college classroom, work hard to demonstrate their capabilities, and strive to be "accepted" as college students. For them the early college high school program means moving ahead on the fast track. At a relatively young age they have identified the critical elements that will make a difference in their lives: the need to continue their education and the effort they must make to remain in college.

*"I will work very hard, harder than anybody else to get a college degree because I want to be successful, and I want to learn,"* stated an early college high school student who had just completed Essentials of Reading II with a grade of A.

Another commented, *"This program, the Excel program, is very important for me and for my whole family. I will be the first to get a college degree and become a professional. I will be very proud of myself."*

One student said, *"I want to do something important with my life. I want to help people and I know that I need to get an education to do this. I want to be a doctor."*

Differences do exist between the early college high school and the LaGuardia students. Obviously, the LaGuardia student is older and has a high school diploma or a General Equivalency Diploma. The early college high school student bridges two different academic environments, the high school as an adolescent and LaGuardia as a college student. Since the academic and social life of the college presents challenges, the early college high school student receives a range of support services for free, but these are not voluntary. Attendance at workshops and counseling sessions are a mandatory part of the Excel program. The LaGuardia student has access to similar opportunities for assistance and support but on a voluntary or self-determined need basis.

Did these differences have an impact on the learning and teaching environment of my classroom? No. Can early college high school students excel in the college classroom? Yes. They have proven themselves to be capable, willing, and able students because they want to be, not because they have to be. This is a program that they see as a means to a very important end: a high school diploma and a two-year college degree, all in five years.

**"I want to do something important with my life. I want to help people and I know that I need to get an education to do this."**



## About the Early College High School Initiative

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Early college high schools are small schools from which students leave with not only a high school diploma but also an Associate's degree or up to two years of college credit toward a Bachelor's degree. By changing the structure of the high school years and compressing the number of years to a college degree, early college high schools have the potential to improve graduation rates and better prepare students for entry into high-skill careers.

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, along with Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Ford Foundation, and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, is funding the Early College High School Initiative. The 13 partner organizations are creating or redesigning more than 250 pioneering small high schools. Jobs for the Future coordinates the Early College High School Initiative and provides support to the partners and to the effort as a whole.

## About the Author

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**Dr. Marcia Glick** has been an associate professor in the Communication Skills Department at LaGuardia Community College since 1996. She teaches a wide range of courses in the department and has been a part of the early college initiative at LaGuardia, both as an instructor and a student mentor, since 2002. She was appointed to the High School-College Advisory Board, is active on many college-wide committees, and is a member of the Colleges' Executive Board for the College Association.

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