
Supporting High School Students in the Transition to College by Kate Spence and Elisabeth Barnett

To help the Middle College National Consortium to learn about students' perspectives on the transition to college, NCREST conducted two focus groups with 13th grade students at two Middle College-Early College high schools. Students expressed positive feelings about their experiences in the combined high school-college program. They also highlighted specific ways that they encountered supports and challenges in their transition to college.

Background

The Middle College National Consortium (MCNC) consists of a network of high schools across the nation, located on community college campuses, which provide historically underrepresented youth with access to college. Since the establishment of the first middle college high school, founded in 1974 at LaGuardia Community College in New York, the MCNC has worked to replicate the original school in other cities around the U.S. The Consortium supports these small schools in implementing six design principles that lay the foundation for an excellent high school education leading to postsecondary success. Students typically enroll in both high school and college classes.

Building on this history, the MCNC, with support from the Gates, Ford, and Carnegie Foundations, has taken this initiative to the next level. The Middle-College Early-College (MC-EC) High Schools blur the border between high school and the community college to create "blended institutions" that offer a dual degree program. Taking a mixture of high school and college courses, students work to attain both a high school diploma and associates degree in four to five years. Students are actively supported and guided as they experience themselves as successful college-level learners.

Studying the Perceptions of 13th Grade Students

While the MC-EC high schools were first funded by Gates in 2002, the 2004-2005 academic year marked the first time that students at several sites enrolled in their 13th grade or fifth year of study. To better understand and learn from their experiences and to obtain information about their future plans, MCNC asked The National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools, and Teaching (NCREST) to conduct focus groups at two of the three sites where 13th grade students were enrolled. In the Spring of



2005, two focus groups lasting 40 minutes each were conducted at MCNC. A total of seven students, who were split equally between two MC-EC high schools, participated. There was consensus by the students in the focus groups that the EC experience was

overwhelmingly positive. Some specific aspects of the program that they found positive were the free tuition, the eased transition from high school to college, and the fact that they were able to finish their high school and associates degrees in one year less than it would traditionally take. Some more specific key findings included:

Structures that Facilitated Transition: General Structures

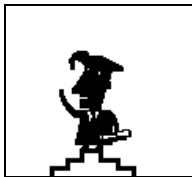
Students described several organizational structures that facilitated their transition from high school to college. They felt that a system was in place to support their moves back and forth between the two environments.

The thing that I liked was the transition from high school to college So we went step by step with our teachers. We met our counselor. It was easy to change from college to high school—from high school to college.

One student mentioned that “being in a high school where you have the opportunity to take classes in a college that’s right across the street” made living in both the high school and college worlds more feasible.

For some students, the course sequence also facilitated learning. Students stated that their work in their high school classes informed their learning in their college classes and vice versa.

Some of the classes like English 101 and English 102 really helps, like for example me, it was really a big help because then I can come to high school with that knowledge that I learned.



Structures that Challenged Transition: High School-College Communication

One critique the students offered was connected to their perception of lack of communication between the high schools and college. They felt that few people knew about the program, and that it was difficult to plan their internships because of this lack of knowledge.

I don't know if this is one of the things that has been missing in the program but the communication between the college and the high school about the program. And you feel like the college should know about it but they don't know. It's so isolated.

At the beginning of the school when we started, we were in the college classes and the professor didn't know about the program. But then afterwards, nobody said anything. And we didn't say anything. Nobody knows about it.

One area where the limited communication between the high school and college had negative implications for some students was in their experiences with particular professors. Professors and their college classmates were usually unaware that the students were high school students, and some professors did not want to teach high school students. They cited negative interactions with a few professors who did not want to teach high school students as an infrequent but memorable problem.

There was a big issue with letting the teachers know we were high school students even though we were taking college classes. That we were in this program We had one teacher that—she was really a pain with us. She didn't agree with the fact that she was a college professor teaching high school students.

Scaffolding that Facilitates the Transition: Student Support

A unique piece to the EC program is the additional support that students receive when they are enrolled in both college and high school classes. In these two schools, this support was in the form of a class called seminar which students took throughout 11th and 12th grades. All EC students felt that the additional support they received through their seminar course was a positive experience that reinforced their growth as students in their high school and college classes as well as their development as people.

The students reported that seminar was used as a place to help them complete their homework, prepare for projects and presentations, and assist with their college classes. They noted that seminar allowed for group learning that was based on their experiences and that the course provided step by step support in “doing” college. The support that they received was not limited to academic issues, though. Students explained that seminar was a place to obtain support or to solve other types of problems, including those that might occur within their families.

Seminar was great. We learned in the group. We can share our own experience, if we have some problems in [college classes]—well not problems—issues about homework or something. We can prepare. A lot of presentations for the class, we would prepare in seminar.

Of all of our classes, seminar is the one—it's really great because a 16 year old or 17 year old kid who cannot do college right away. You need to go step by step. In seminar they help us go through each step.

I think seminar helped us with [being prepared for college classes]. Like at the beginning some of us were having trouble with the classes and the teacher and we didn't really know how to approach them so then we would go back to seminar and talk about all these things that were bothering us or that we were having troubles with and they would tell us what we could do.



One challenge the students encountered in connection to seminar was linked to the continuity of support they received. At one of the schools, the teacher left and a new seminar teacher took her place. However, students never established a strong connection with the second teacher, pointing to the significance of continuity in support.

One thing that I don't think really worked, they changed our cohort teacher. . . when that happened, we just kind of got separated and each went their way and the new teacher, I didn't have that same trust that I had built with [previous cohort teacher]. And I think that really changed the cohort thing.

But the problem with our seminar was, the first year we spent with one teacher and the next year we changed from seminar and the teacher didn't really work with us. We used to work with the other teacher.

Flexibility in Course-Taking

Because these students entered the EC program during its initial years, certain aspects of its implementation at these two high schools changed during their tenure. One element that changed was the specific associates degree that students would earn. Students in the focus groups critiqued the original inflexibility of course-taking that they experienced. Because they were all initially liberal arts majors, the classes they took were designed to fulfill basic requirements, which some of the students found boring. They felt restricted by the limited flexibility in course-taking and expressed a desire to choose classes that would lead to the completion of a degree other than the associates in liberal arts.

The only weakness of the whole program is that they didn't tell us that we could change our major because say someone wanted to go into business and they were taking liberal arts, and then those credits wouldn't apply towards their major. That's the only thing that's the weakness of the program.

Transitioning to Independence—13th Grade

Students reported that their experiences as 13th graders were different from the previous years, largely because they were enrolled solely in college courses. While the 13th grade did allow the students increasing independence, the transition was difficult for some students who had grown comfortable with the support they had received through seminar.

We didn't have [seminar] this year because—yeah—we didn't have it this year, so when this year started, I was like, Oh my God, we really need help. We really need to establish a seminar again because it's—I mean we were all alone.

For me, this year has been like I'm in college alone. We don't go to the high school anymore.

Despite these initial feelings of disconnection with the high school and of being without support, 13th grade students recognized that they were transitioning towards becoming full time college students and that if necessary, they could return to the high school if they did need support.

Student 1: *One of the strengths is that after we finish high school, we're really supposed to be on our own. They gave us the strength to really learn and experience being on our own after the 12th year. So I think maybe it was better that it happened like that. Because maybe if we had had seminar all this year, when we really got to our college environment, we might be stuck.*

Student 2: *I agree because in college there is not going to be a teacher there. And we still can go back and ask some questions to our high school teachers or to our old seminar teacher. It's not that we are really by ourselves. It's getting us used to it.*

If we would have had seminar this year, maybe we wouldn't have been open enough to go and seek help. So that kind of like, helped us grow more.

I think it's better not having a cohort in the third year, not having seminar because you're really on your own in the third year. You're going to college after.

Implications

These findings have implications for school administrators, counselors, and teachers who are involved in schools where students are dually enrolled in college and high school classes.

- 1) Students perceived the additional support they received through seminar as central to their success in their college classes. Providing formal and systematic scaffolding for students who are dually enrolled may lead to greater academic success.
- 2) While students begin to transition towards independence in their later high school years, they still may need support in navigating systems, especially in connection to their completion of high school and their move towards enrolling solely in college classes or transferring to another college.
- 3) Formalized communication systems between the high school and partnering college, especially around knowledge of the program, may alleviate stress and possible negative interactions for high school students.
- 4) Establishing a formal academic plan that displays all needed coursework may be helpful. This can be shared with students,

parents, teachers, professors, and anyone else involved who needs information about required and elective courses.

- 5) Given the importance that students placed on their relationships with teachers, implementing plans related to staff retention may be an additional way to support student success.

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