

**Massachusetts Department of Higher Education  
Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education**



**Early College Program Designation Criteria  
As Approved by Early College Joint Committee  
June 2017**

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# Early College Program Designation Criteria

## Guiding Principle 1: Equitable Access

***Designated programs should prioritize students underrepresented in higher education enrollment and completion. To facilitate this, programs should be structured to eliminate barriers to student participation. Design might therefore include, but not be limited to, tuition-free participation, open enrollment without regard to prior academic performance, student supports to promote success, scalability, multiple entry points for students, and student supports to prepare students for entry into the program.***

The designation criteria pursuant to this guiding principle are designed to focus on the goal of closing achievement gaps and offering educational models to leverage students' own personal assets and help them thrive. Research of early college models nationally has demonstrated the effectiveness of designing early college to ensure equitable access. As such, the Massachusetts Early College designation is designed with the goal of broadening access to college through this model.

Therefore, this portion of the application is aimed towards keeping entry into early college pathways as open as possible, particularly with regard to prior academic performance. It is also focused on prioritizing program design and enrollments for students who have historically been underrepresented in higher education. Therefore, designation applicants are encouraged to make real, targeted, and thoughtful efforts to aggressively recruit students who may be the first in their family to go to college, who are part of demographic groups historically underrepresented in higher education, who may be English language learners, or who may otherwise not yet possess a perception that they may be a college going student.

### **Preliminary Designation Criteria to demonstrate Equitable Access**

1. The program is designed and funded such that it will be offered free for all student participants—including tuition, fees, and other related expenses.
2. Should student applications exceed program capacity, participation should be determined by a lottery among applicants, or by another method intended to ensure equitable access to the program.
3. Initial enrollment in early college should be made without regard to past academic performance.<sup>1</sup>
4. The program will present an effective plan for outreach and recruitment of students who are traditionally underrepresented in higher education, including students of color, low income students, English language learners and students with disabilities. The program leverages the work of existing college access programming to identify students who would benefit from the program. Programs are encouraged to utilize the postsecondary Early Warning Indicator System (EWIS) to identify and target eligible students.

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<sup>1</sup> This aspect of program design is subject to and may account for appropriate processes to address suitability for special populations of students, such as those with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Programs may also be designed to require students to meet reasonable benchmarks of participation, engagement, and performance to continue participation.

5. Program design aims to reflect an admissions and placement policy that ensures that the highest number of first-generation and other underrepresented students are able to participate successfully in early college programming.
6. Data are presented about the current number and percent of students in the high school or district that are low-income, students of color, and/or first generation who would be targeted for inclusion.

**Final Designation Criteria to demonstrate Equitable Access:**

The applicant shall continue to meet all criteria requisite for Preliminary Designation. In addition, the applicant must demonstrate:

1. Long-term program design that reflects a reasonable plan to target enrollment of significant scale relative to school/school district size.
2. Program design that reflects thoughtfulness and opportunity with regard to student entry and exit points in the program. A program will demonstrate a clear pathway for students, but will also be designed to allow for more than one entry point for students. Program design will also be structured such that should a student need to exit the program, the student will be able to seamlessly transition out of the program and back into the traditional or a different high school program.
3. The applicant will also submit the following:
  - a. Longitudinal data showing at least five years of student enrollment trends.
  - b. Needs assessment demonstrating potential district need for such a program in the district or region. Such a needs assessment could include high school graduation rates, postsecondary entry/persistence/completion rates, skills gaps within the regional labor force, economic trends, community support, etc.
  - c. Written recruitment plan, including a timeline of recruitment and enrollment events, and recruitment materials for distribution at feeder schools and other appropriate locations in the community (e.g., recruitment schedule).
  - d. Written communication plan for targeting identified audiences, parents, community members, school board, higher education personnel, business and industry partners, etc.
  - e. Materials used for outreach and recruitment, including but not limited to, brochures and marketing in English as well as Spanish and/or relevant second language(s).
  - f. Written admission policy, including a potential lottery process and any program enrollment requirements.

- g. Calendar of family/parent outreach events and other opportunities to educate students, counselors, principals, parents, the school board, business and industry partners, and community members on the Early College program.

## **Guiding Principle 2: Guided Academic Pathways**

***Designated programs should be structured around clear and detailed student academic pathways from secondary and post-secondary education with regard to coursework, sequencing, and experiences beyond the classroom. Given this pathway, students should be expected to complete at least twelve college credits that count towards a postsecondary credential. Programs should also offer students substantive exposure to career opportunities in high demand fields, allowing them to make an informed decision about which career pathway to pursue. Students should also be exposed to the authentic experience and academic rigor of postsecondary education. This would require validating that courses are as rigorous as college level courses offered on campuses. Further, programs should prioritize allowing students to take at least one or more courses on college and university campuses where possible, and otherwise offer experiences intended to acculturate students to the postsecondary experience.***

Guided academic pathways ensure that students experience coherence, clarity and connection as to their path, but flexibility as to their exploration. And these pathways also ensure that young people develop identities as college going students. As a corollary, we hope for a similar combination of innovation and structure with regard to early college program design itself. Early college designation will not require that a pathway be in a specific field (nor is such specificity precluded), although designation expectations require that students will, at a minimum, be educated as to their postsecondary education *and* career options and the connection between both.

More specifically, designation will prioritize the valuable work of our public campuses to develop Associate's to Bachelor's degree pathways between the public two and four year institutions. Applicants should, at the program design phase, think deeply not only about the pathway within the early college program itself, but also the value of the courses and credits achieved by students who successfully complete early college and how they would transfer to degree programs.

Understanding that some applicants may include postsecondary partners who are not public higher education institutions, we appreciate that there will necessarily be exceptions to this preference. Furthermore, we understand that there may be programs that are designed as intentional pathways, but not aligned with a major or course of study that is currently mapped. Ultimately, however, the designation will require a demonstration that the course taking in early college is intended to support relative flexibility for students as well as credit attainment that will be of value as the student continues on the pathway in pursuit of an associate's and/or a bachelor's degree.

### **Preliminary Designation Criteria to demonstrate Guided Academic Pathways:**

For a Preliminary Designation, the applicant must meet the following criteria relevant to Guided Academic Pathways:

1. The program design has clearly articulated, thoughtfully designed, and fully integrated pathway(s) for students, including:
  - a. Pathway(s) are designed to prepare students in earlier grades for later college level course taking;
  - b. inclusion of early career development and postsecondary education exploration, grounded in employability skills and labor market information;
  - c. program design reflecting an integration of course taking and career awareness exploration and/or work based learning experiences, informed by and offered in partnership with area employers;
  - d. course taking is linked with the broader college going experience, such that where feasible, at least some academic courses are taught on the campus of the postsecondary partner institution;
  - e. program is designed such that during high school, students will have gained a clear understanding of the postsecondary pathways and courses of study available to them, and how those courses of study will help facilitate their career aspirations; and
  - f. program is designed such that upon completion, students will have at least 12 transferable college credits, and students will also fully understand the range of postsecondary institutions available to them, how to matriculate at those institutions, and how to pursue the financial aid necessary to pay for those opportunities.
2. The program outlines a basic plan for scope and sequence of high school courses to enable participating students to prepare for and later access college-level coursework in a cohort of their peers.
3. The range of college credits available to be completed (with a minimum on-plan target of 12) should be stated. To the extent possible, these courses should fall under the MassTransfer Gen Ed Foundation and align with established "A2B Mapped" Degree Pathways.<sup>2</sup>
4. The program includes a description of when and where college coursework will be completed and how it is articulated with a high school's graduation requirements.

**Final Designation Criteria to demonstrate Guided Academic Pathways:**

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<sup>2</sup> The Department of Higher Education, in collaboration with the three segments of public higher education, has developed "A2B Mapped" degrees in specific disciplines and metamajors that seek to create a seamless transition from two-year to four-year institutions. To the extent possible, high school pathways and course offerings should be aligned with the "A2B" mapped degrees, and these pathways should be an essential part of the consideration of any Early College program design process.

The applicant shall continue to meet all criteria requisite for Preliminary Designation. In addition, the applicant must provide:

1. Scope and sequence evidencing a course of study allowing for all students who complete the program as designed to graduate with at least 12 college credits.
  - a. We strongly suggest that, at a minimum, students complete English Composition I or the equivalent and a college-level mathematics course prior to completion of the early college program. Students should be identified as more interested in a STEM or non-STEM pathway for the purposes of completing a math course that will be appropriate for their field of study.
  - b. Further, as stated above, program design should reflect an effort to ensure that student course taking aligns with MassTransfer Pathways. As such, it is recommended that the remaining course sequence be mapped with major requirements for a particular A2B Mapped Degree Pathways or with the MassTransfer GenEd Foundation.
  - c. Program design should also reflect a pathway that allows a student to complete both a two year and four year degree, should they wish. As such, it is strongly recommended that program design reflect course sequencing aligned with admissions requirements for the Massachusetts public four year institutions and that the program is designed such that students complete MassCore. If, for some reason, program design does not so align, applicants must articulate the rationale.
2. Evidence of curricular alignment between high school and college courses.
3. Proposed schedules for students enrolled in the Early College High School program. Note that should the proposed program require a Student Learning Time waiver, the application for that waiver should be included in the application for final designation.
4. Sample redacted individualized learning plan (ILP), including connections between areas of interest and exposure to career opportunities.
5. Proposed high school course catalogs or additions to existing catalogs, including program outlines and course descriptions and syllabi.
6. Written policy for placement of students into college courses that includes strategies for assuring student preparedness. Early college partners are strongly encouraged to explore alternatives to determine student placement.

### **Guiding Principle 3: Enhanced Student Support**

***Designated programs should incorporate sufficient wraparound services to promote academic success and completion, taking into consideration the needs of diverse populations of students.***

Early college should be designed not as a boutique program, but should reflect a holistic program design in contemplation of the lived experience of the target student population. Specifically, programs are encouraged to develop student support in consideration of a whole

student, in contemplation of student development broadly, development of academic proficiency and support related to barriers faced both externally and with regard to academic course taking.

### **Preliminary Designation Criteria to demonstrate Enhanced Student Support**

1. The program plan identifies potential academic and nonacademic challenges for potential student participants.
2. Plans include supports for academic, nonacademic, and career purposes. These plans should incorporate evidence-based strategies and consider the supports offered by existing college access programming, e.g. scaffolding of curricula and student learning outcomes.
3. Program design includes an outline of potential academic supports, including but not limited to counseling/advising and tutoring, both at the high school and college levels.
4. An appropriate contact for student support is named in the application. Contact information for this individual is provided, along with a description of the role. If the role requires staff to be hired, a proposed job description is included.
5. Appropriate behavior, health and safety procedures for students on college campuses are addressed.

### **Final Designation Criteria to demonstrate Enhanced Student Support**

The applicant shall continue to meet all criteria requisite for Preliminary Designation. In addition, the applicant must provide:

1. Comprehensive plan for ongoing academic and non-academic support so students will be on a pathway to take college courses in high school; the plan must address supports for English Language Learners, students with disabilities, and first generation college students.
2. Student schedules evidencing advisory/or college access/ readiness and support time built into the program.
3. If the proposed schedule for students is likely not to meet the minimum 180 days/990 hours of instruction, applicant shall include a description as to how the proposed schedule will ensure that students will have sufficient access to learning supports to successfully complete program requirements.<sup>3</sup>
4. Advisory/study skills curriculum material and tutoring schedules.
5. Detailed calendar of awareness activities for current and prospective students, including application assistance, financial aid counseling, and college and career advising.

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<sup>3</sup> Final designation of an Early College design will also serve as a waiver of the [Student Learning Time \(SLT\) regulations](#), if needed.



6. Policy on communicating to students that they are at risk for failing a course, supports for helping the student get back on track, and actions that may or may not be taken if a student fails a course or multiple courses.

## **Guiding Principle 4: Connection to Career**

***Designated programs should expose students to a variety of career opportunities including greater depth in careers relevant to their selected pathway, for example, by providing opportunities for targeted workforce and career skills development, career counseling, and elements of experiential and workplace learning.***

This guiding principle dictates that designated early college programs should be designed to support college and career readiness such that students are expected to develop awareness of their educational growth and development while understanding the manner in which their educational path is connected to career opportunities. This connection should be framed broadly, to allow students to explore career possibilities and to more generally develop foundational employability skills necessary to thrive in any work environment.

### **Preliminary Designation Criteria to demonstrate Connection to Career:**

1. Career Development Education (CDE) is integral to the early college program design, with career awareness, exploration and/or immersion activities included in the program across the four years of high school<sup>4</sup>,
2. Program is designed to incorporate in depth and comprehensive college and career counseling that aligns to the necessary elements of individual learning plans (as defined by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education).
3. College and career counseling and education incorporates relevant regional and statewide labor market data as a method to inform students about career opportunities beyond college and supports students to make the connection between that information and their potential pathways.
4. Specific career and college counseling will be part of the early college program plan, including the guided use of individualized learning plans beginning in 9<sup>th</sup> grade.
5. Program will engage area employers to support connections between education and career.
6. Courses offered as part of the early college program will be aligned with multiple postsecondary and degree pathways (see Guided Pathways).

### **Final Designation Criteria to demonstrate Connection to Career:**

The applicant shall continue to meet all criteria requisite for Preliminary Designation. In addition, the applicant must provide:

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<sup>4</sup> Immersive experiences include internships, capstones, cooperative education, or clinical experiences (as defined by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education).

1. Proposed career development education activities, by grade level, that include awareness, exploration, and/or immersion (internships, proposed career pathways) that consider labor market information.
2. A plan for proposed career development education activities for students. This plan should include specific employer contacts in order to demonstrate a commitment of community businesses and other partners, with the goal of exposing students to a variety of career options and internship opportunities.
3. Identification of the higher education partner's commitment and resources to help support connections between education and career.
7. Incorporation and integration of an online tool for use in college and career counseling (e.g., Naviance or MEFA Your Plan for the Future).

## **Guiding Principle 5: Effective Partnerships**

***Designated programs should be a partnership between at least one institution of higher education and one public secondary school and district, and may include one or more employers. Partnerships should present evidence that the program is consistent with collective bargaining agreements and memoranda of understanding detailing the nature of governance, budget, sustainability, scheduling, respective responsibilities, and performance measures. Programs should be sufficient in size to capture economies of scale goals and to ensure long-term sustainability.***

Fundamentally, an effective and sustainable early college program necessitates a fully integrated partnership between the school, district, and postsecondary institution. Tacit agreement to collaborate is not sufficient—deep commitment to partnership and continued full collaboration on both sides is imperative. While designation purposes therefore require substantive evidence of these partnerships in the form of a MOU, what will be most important to maintain these partnerships will be clear and respected relationships between instructors and leadership at both institutions.

### **Preliminary Designation Criteria to demonstrate Effective Partnerships:**

1. The K-12 school district(s) and postsecondary institution outline plans to be fully integrated partners in the program. Roles and responsibilities of each partner during the planning process are clearly identified, including which entity will be the fiscal agent.
2. Where there is a requirement for local bargaining relating to any aspect of the pathway, local requirements must be followed. The proposal outlines plans to have discussions concerning collective bargaining agreements, at both the K-12 and higher education level, as needed.
3. Each partner has identified personnel empowered with the authority to enter into memoranda of understanding discussions.
4. Application details the leadership at each partner institution empowered to make decisions around early college at the K-12, higher education, employer, and community level.

5. Plan will detail initial plans identifying key costs associated with the program for both institutions, including—but not limited to—per credit student support and student transportation. Applicant partners have realistic plan to sustainably support a high quality program across all partners, and have identified a necessary funding structure to achieve that goal.
6. Applicant has provided preliminary outlines and a clear plan to complete detail regarding graduation requirements, college course taking, and pathways to credentials including certificates, associate, and bachelor's degrees.

**Final Designation Criteria to demonstrate Effective Partnerships:**

The applicant shall continue to meet all criteria requisite for Preliminary Designation. In addition, the applicant must provide:

1. A joint or common vision statement agreed upon by partners, and the value add of and value proposition for each partner.
2. A current, signed Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that defines an active partnership between the school district and the institution of higher education (IHE) that addresses topics including, but not limited to:
  - a. the location and proposed faculty of the dual credit courses offered in the Early College program;
  - b. the anticipated costs and planned funding sources for all instruction costs and for all support, logistical, administrative and other activities, including but not limited to costs for tuition, fees, and textbooks;
  - c. student transportation;
  - d. program coordination plan;
  - e. student support plan;
  - f. faculty support plan; and
  - g. career partnership coordination plan.
3. The MOU shall also include the following necessary components:
  - a. grading periods and policies;
  - b. courses of study;
  - c. curriculum alignment;
  - d. student learning outcomes;
  - e. instructional materials;
  - f. instructional calendar;
  - g. student enrollment and attendance policies;
  - h. provisions for discontinuing ECHS program operation in the event that becomes necessary;
  - i. provisions and processes for collecting, sharing, and reviewing student and teacher/instructor data to assess the progress of the ECHS program;
  - j. policy for advising students on the transferability of all college credits offered and earned;
  - k. professional development for ECHS faculty (including both district and IHE faculty/staff);
  - l. policy to ensure the IHE transcripts college credit earned through dual credit in the same semester that credit is earned;

- m. policy addressing the role of each partner in the resolution of student issues (including student conduct, investigative procedures, consequences); and
  - n. indication of how often the MOU will be reviewed.
4. The MOU shall also detail performance measure goals, and how the data attached to those measures will be collected, analyzed, and disseminated. Those measures should include but not be limited to the following:
- a. retention rate of participating students, disaggregated by subgroup;
  - b. high school graduation rate of participating students;
  - c. percentage of participating students who complete the program;
  - d. percentage of participating students who gain postsecondary credits and how many credits;
  - e. percentage of participating students who achieve an associate's or bachelor's degree within three or six years of high school graduation; and
  - f. college and/or career outcomes of students.
5. Detailed MOUs for any other partnerships, including community-based organizations, businesses, and other partners.
6. The application should also include the following for the program in the aggregate:
- a. budgets, including estimates of both start-up costs as well as per student ongoing costs to sustain the program (with reference to the cost estimates described in the Parthenon study);
  - b. staffing plans;
  - c. faculty and teacher qualifications;
  - d. job descriptions for individuals supporting the ECHS Program;
  - e. training or professional development and support plans;
  - f. student mentor/induction program plans;
  - g. faculty and teacher assignments.