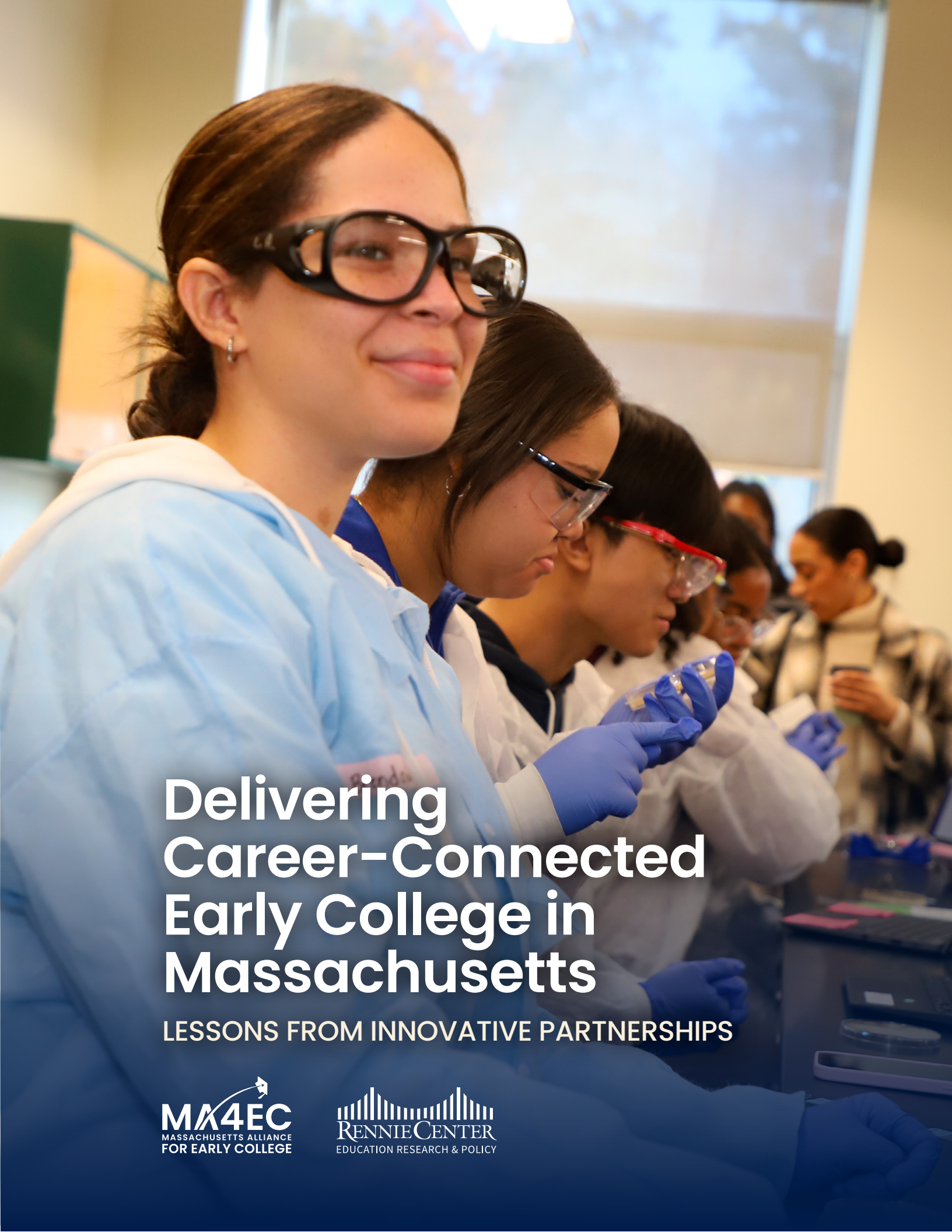


A photograph of several students in a laboratory setting. They are wearing white lab coats, safety goggles, and blue gloves. One student in the foreground is looking towards the camera with a slight smile, while others are focused on their work. The background shows a bright, modern lab environment with large windows.

Delivering Career-Connected Early College in Massachusetts

LESSONS FROM INNOVATIVE PARTNERSHIPS

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Introduction

Artificial intelligence. Skilled labor deficits. Rising costs. Geopolitical shifts. Recent years have introduced no shortage of pressures on American labor markets, prompting rapid changes in workforce needs that have left our education sector scrambling to keep pace. To ensure students can achieve economic mobility amid the turbulence, high schools are increasingly focused on building integrated pathways to postsecondary education that prepare students for in-demand careers with living wages—pathways that enable students to earn college credit, engage in career-connected learning, and build transferable skills, while developing a sense of agency and purpose.

In Massachusetts, the expansion of Early College partnerships has been a prominent strategy to bolster such pathways. Early College partnerships, through close collaboration between high schools and institutions of higher education, enable high school students to enroll in structured sequences of college courses while receiving robust support, preparing students for success in postsecondary degree programs that advance them toward skilled careers.

The launch of the Massachusetts Early College Initiative in 2017 created a formal Early College designation process that sought to expand the Early College model to more districts statewide, with a dedicated focus on promoting equitable access to higher education for marginalized students. Since that time, the number of designated Early College programs has grown significantly to 102 partnerships, representing a five-fold increase in participating high schools, a four-fold increase in participating institutions of higher education, and an eight-fold increase in student enrollment. During the 2026–2027 school year, over 12,000 students across Massachusetts are expected to participate in designated Early College programs.¹

THE BENEFITS OF EARLY COLLEGE FOR STUDENTS

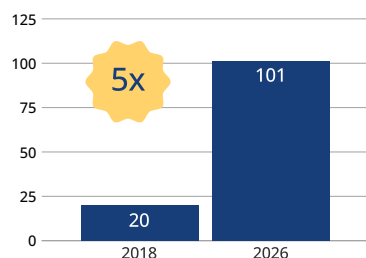
By scaffolding college coursework with a high level of support—e.g., cohorting courses, tutoring, advising—and focusing on college and career success together, Early College pathways in Massachusetts enable students to meaningfully:

- Explore majors and careers and forge a sense of direction
- Gain experience navigating college and career routines, environments, and expectations
- Build college and career readiness skills
- Develop confidence and a college going identity
- Earn at least 12 transferable credits toward a college degree linked to a career

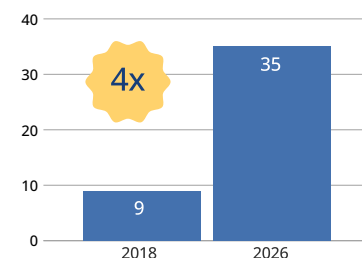
Statewide, Early College partnerships demonstrate positive outcomes for college success:

- 69% of Early College students enrolled in higher education after graduating high school, compared to 54% of matched peers.²
- 82% of Early College students persist to a second year of college.³ Students who persist to a second year are 7 times more likely to ultimately complete their degree than students who do not persist to a second year.⁴

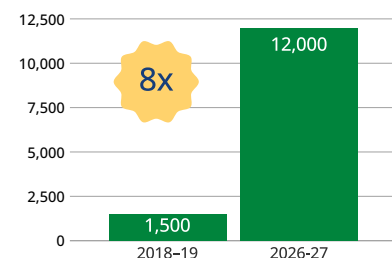
Number of High Schools in Early College Partnerships



Number of Institutions of Higher Education in Early College Partnerships



Number of Students Participating in Early College Pathways



Many Early College partnerships, including those profiled in this report, operate from the premise that college preparation and career preparation are deeply intertwined. By providing an opportunity to earn at least 12 transferable college credits (and often more) while in high school, they help students build meaningful momentum toward a college degree in pursuit of a financially secure career. The potential impact on students' economic prospects is significant, as college degrees are projected to remain gateways to financial stability into the foreseeable future (see the text box below). Equally important are the impacts on students' personal growth, as they develop confidence, competence, and a sense of purpose that prepare them to become stewards of their own futures.

THE ECONOMIC RETURNS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

College degrees open doors to well-paying jobs. By 2031, 66% of "good jobs"—those that pay a minimum of \$43,000 per year and a median of \$74,000 in 2022 dollars for employees aged 25-44—will require at least a bachelor's degree.⁵ In Massachusetts, for an adult with no children, 68% of living-wage jobs require at least an associate degree. For two adults with two children, that figure is 82%.⁶

College degrees increase lifetime earnings. Associate and bachelor's degree holders earn an average of \$400,000 and \$1.2 million more in lifetime earnings, respectively, than individuals with only a high school diploma.⁷

College degrees lower the risk of unemployment. In 2024, the unemployment rates for associate degree holders and bachelor's degree holders were 2.8% and 2.5%, respectively, compared to 4.2% for individuals with only a high school diploma.⁸ Individuals with college degrees also tend to experience fewer job losses during a recession and greater job gains following a recession.⁹

College degrees narrow opportunity gaps. Students who attend the same institution of higher education have similar earnings outcomes regardless of their family's income level during childhood¹⁰

College experience below a bachelor's degree opens doors to middle-skill jobs. By 2031, 31% of job openings will require some amount of higher education less than a bachelor's degree.¹¹ Apprenticeship programs, certificate programs, and reskilling pathways often require some college coursework.

Reflecting this premise, the intentional integration of college and career readiness is a priority for many Early College partnerships. The design principles for formally designated partnerships state that each Early College program should advance students toward both a college major and a career (Design Principle #2) and that Early College students should have access to work-based learning experiences that complement their academic learning (Design Principle #4).

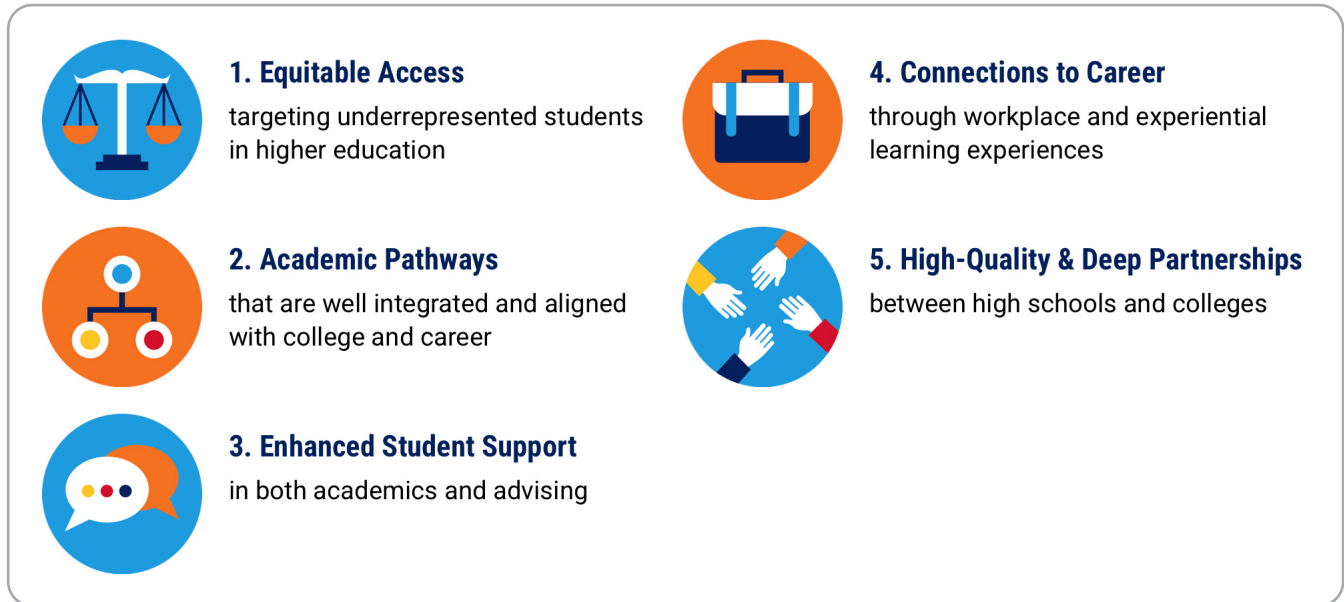


Image source: Massachusetts Department of Higher Education

For partnerships that design their programs around this connection, college-oriented and career-oriented learning experiences are treated as overlapping and mutually reinforcing—both are needed to help students identify their aspirations; make informed decisions about their future plans; extend and apply their academic learning; and gain skills, knowledge, and experience that will make them capable and competitive in any postsecondary endeavor. Within this design approach, students are not asked to choose between college preparation and career preparation; doing both simultaneously opens up a world of possibility.

The following four components define this emerging career-connected Early College approach, each explored in greater depth throughout the report:

- **Transferable college credit:** Students are able to complete credit-bearing college coursework organized around sector-focused pathways, including transferable general education courses aligned with the [MassTransfer Block](#) and advanced coursework linked to an industry-oriented major (in fields like health care, education, and business, for example). While state designation requires a minimum of 12 college credits, career-connected Early College approaches are increasingly designed to build toward deeper credit attainment, with course sequences often co-designed alongside industry partners to ensure relevance.

- **Complementary career-connected learning opportunities:** Career-connected learning is the umbrella term for the range of experiences that help students explore industry sectors, build durable skills, and develop professional networks. These experiences exist on a continuum, from lighter-touch career awareness (e.g., guest speakers, career fairs) and career exploration (e.g., site visits, project-based learning) to more resource-intensive career preparation such as internships and co-ops. Career-connected learning complements students' Early College coursework and may be delivered through supplementary work-based learning experiences, [Innovation Career Pathways](#), and/or [Career Technical Education](#).
- **Credentials and certifications:** In addition to college credit, students may have the opportunity to earn industry-recognized credentials relevant to their sector of interest, such as OSHA 10, emergency medical technician (EMT) or phlebotomy certifications. When these credentials are portable and stackable toward a larger degree, they can give students a direct on-ramp to the workforce while they continue their studies. Given wide variability in the value of non-degree credentials,¹² career-connected Early College programs are intentional about prioritizing credentials that carry demonstrated value with employers and can provide students with employment while pursuing their degree.
- **Advising, navigation, and transition support:** Because students are still forming their identities and interests, career-connected Early College programs emphasize exploration and choice, supported by dedicated counselors and advisers. Structured reflection tools like [My Career and Academic Plan](#) (MyCAP) help students make sense of their interests, skills, and experiences and set goals that span



both college and career aspirations. This advising also shapes program design and informs integration of college and career pathways; as student interests come into focus, partnerships can use that information to decide which courses and career-connected learning opportunities to offer.

Bringing these four components together in practice is challenging. It often requires coordinating both college and industry partners, overcoming funding and scheduling constraints, and designing pathways with intention so that students can explore different focus areas, advance along a chosen trajectory, and engage in structured reflection about their experiences. While Early College partnerships work hard to achieve meaningful college and career integration, many would benefit from guidance on effective models and practices, along with additional resources.

This report seeks to spotlight emerging practices that partnerships are using to foster this integrated approach, with the goal of surfacing lessons the broader field can draw on. It highlights *key considerations* for designing career-connected Early College programs and the enabling conditions that support effective delivery of such programs. Our research draws upon case studies of five career-connected Early College partnerships across Massachusetts. Through document reviews and interviews with partnership leaders (and in one case, students), we identified insights from each site that offer strategies for blending college and career readiness in high school.

Collectively, the case studies and findings in this report speak to the need to remove silos from postsecondary pathways and uplift a comprehensive vision of future readiness that supports all students in finding a path to postsecondary success. The ultimate goal is to promote not only prosperity and economic mobility, but also student empowerment, equipping each student to become the person they hope to be and build the life they wish to lead.

Approaches to Career-Connected Early College

As the Early College initiative has matured, there has been an increased emphasis on offering coursework and complementary experiences aligned with career sectors, specifically those that match labor market needs and student interests. These career-connected approaches deliver the elements that are central to all Early College program partnerships throughout Massachusetts—transferable college credit, rigorous coursework, and structured support. What distinguishes career-connected approaches is a deliberate emphasis on career preparation and advancement woven into the Early College model, helping students graduate high school with significant college credit and meaningful professional momentum.

The structure and delivery of career-connected Early College varies from school to school. Some high schools build career connection by allowing students to participate in a designated [Innovation Career Pathway](#) program or a [Career Technical Education](#) program that runs alongside Early College. Vocational technical high schools can also incorporate Early College into their existing programming. Other schools build career preparation directly into an Early College pathway through career-themed course sequences and complementary career-connected learning experiences. Through all of these designs, career-connected Early College programs work to adopt an ethos of integrated college and career preparation that extends into schools' structures, language, and routines.

Current Methods of Advancing Career Connection within Early College Programs

METHOD 1

Accommodate complementary career pathways

- Innovation Career Pathways
- Career Technical Education (CTE) programs
- Vocational technical high schools

METHOD 2

Offer complementary career-connected learning

- Career awareness
- Career exploration
- Career preparation, including work-based learning like internships and co-ops

METHOD 3

Design career-aligned Early College coursework and sequences

- Career-themed course sequences
- Courses that confer industry-recognized certifications
- Industry-designed curricula

The five Early College partnerships profiled in this report differ in their approaches to career-connected Early College, employing the three methods above to varying degrees and in various ways. All have built Early College pathways that meet or surpass the minimum of 12 transferable credits required for Early College designation in Massachusetts, and some build toward as many as 60 credits, or an associate degree. Through these academic pathways, all emphasize the importance of “college for career.” In many of the partnerships, the high school partner offers additional career-related programs that expand the slate of postsecondary pathways available to students and create opportunities to further integrate college and career experiences.

Typology of the Five Profiled Early College Partnerships

Abbreviations: **CTE**: Career Technical Education, **EC**: Early College, **ICP**: Innovation Career Pathways

	Built to 12+ Credits	Built to ~30 Credits	Built to 60 Credits
Vocational-technical school with EC designation EC complements vocational-technical training	Whittier Regional Vocational Technical High School (Haverhill) General education EC courses in partnership with Northern Essex Community College. <i>Number of EC students, spring 2025: 162</i>		
High school with CTE programs and EC designation offers CTE, possibly ICP, alongside EC		B.M.C. Durfee High School (Fall River) Six career-themed EC pathways across three higher ed partners: Bristol Community College, Bridgewater State University, and University of Massachusetts Dartmouth; 25% of EC students also participate in CTE. <i>Number of EC students, spring 2025: 377</i>	
High school with both ICP and EC designations students participate in both ICP and EC		Mount Everett Regional School (Sheffield) Wall-to-wall EC with University of Massachusetts Amherst; shares a director with ICP for strong integration. <i>Number of EC students, spring 2025: 154</i>	Dearborn STEM Academy (Boston) EC implemented with Franklin Cummings Tech and Wentworth Institute of Technology alongside STEM-themed ICP. <i>Number of EC students, spring 2025: 169</i>
High school with career-themed EC pathways career connection built into EC pathways			Gardner High School (Gardner) Five career-themed EC pathways via a regional consortium with Mount Wachusett Community College and Fitchburg State University. <i>Number of EC students, spring 2025: 133</i>

Some partnerships have elements that fit more than one cell. The goal of this typology is to highlight varying structures in Massachusetts career-connected Early College programs.

Early College student counts for each school were sourced from the [Massachusetts Early College Dashboard](#) maintained by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Core Experiences in Career-Connected Early College

While the Early College partnerships we examined differ in their approaches, they all 1) incorporate an ongoing process of exploration and reflection, and 2) center on enabling students' meaningful advancement toward a postsecondary degree and eventual career. This section describes each throughline in turn.

Exploration and Reflection on Career Possibilities

Middle and high school students are moving through the crucible of identity formation, figuring out who they are, what they value, and what kind of life they wish to build. Career-connected Early College partnerships are designed to support that process by giving students ample opportunity to try out different college and career possibilities and offering transferable, flexible pathways that provide deep preparation without asking students to commit to one future irreversibly. In many cases, exploration continues alongside coursework and career-connected learning for the full duration of an Early College pathway.

Early exposure typically casts a wide and shallow net: visits to college campuses and job sites, guest speakers representing higher education and industry, college and career fairs, and First Year Experience (FYE) or exploratory courses that introduce students to sector-themed pathways, such as health care, education, or business and technology. These experiences tend to be frontloaded in middle school and grades 9 and 10, giving students enough runway to make meaningful progress once they prioritize a pathway.



Common experiences that promote exploration include:

- Visits to college campuses and job sites
- Guest speakers representing higher education and various industries
- Information sessions for Early College, Innovation Career Pathways, and Career Technical Education programs
- Early College exploratory courses, sometimes called First Year Experience (FYE) courses
- College and career fairs
- Exploratory courses or rotations to learn about Innovation Career Pathways or Career Technical Education programs
- Project-based learning in high school courses
- [My Career and Academic Plan \(MyCAP\)](#)
- Advising

Exploration continues even after students have chosen a pathway. Whether a capstone project confirms their interest in a major, an internship reveals a mismatch between what they imagined and the day-to-day realities of a career, or a new elective opens up a direction they had not considered, programs aim to provide on-ramps to a range of career possibilities, enabling students to adjust their direction while advancing meaningfully along a postsecondary pathway.

For students to gain maximum benefit from their coursework and career-connected experiences, they need support to make sense of what they are learning and understand how it shapes their postsecondary decisions. Advising is what makes this possible, and it takes on heightened importance in career-connected Early College, where the goal is to help students make informed decisions about their future. Every partnership profiled in this report provides some form of dedicated advising, whether one-on-one meetings, an advisory period, or a support course. Additionally, every partnership uses My Career and Academic Plan (MyCAP), a requirement of Massachusetts Early College designation, to help students reflect on their interests, skills, and goals. Through advising, students form relationships with trusted adults, such as Early College advisers, who help them make sense of their experiences and navigate a menu of college and career offerings.

Programs are beginning to experiment with ways to make advising more robust, particularly when it comes to bridging high school and higher education. Today, higher education advisers rarely have access to Early College students' MyCAP plans. Once students graduate, high school counselors lose access to those plans, meaning that there is no mechanism that extends MyCAP or a similar tool into postsecondary. Two partnerships profiled in this report are working to address this challenge. The Dearborn STEM Academy's Dearborn NEXT program connects each student with a postsecondary counselor for six years after graduation, and B.M.C. Durfee High School's partnership with OneGoal delivers structured reflection and advising to students beginning in grade 11 and ending one year after graduation. These early efforts offer promising approaches for how the field might build advising structures that follow students seamlessly from high school into their postsecondary endeavors.

Advancement Along a Postsecondary Pathway

Participating in a career-themed pathway is itself a form of exploration. As students take coursework and engage in career-connected learning, they may find their interest in a field reinforced, or they may discover that a different pathway suits them better and decide to switch. Either way, career-connected Early College partnerships are designed to help students build momentum toward a college major and a career, while preserving students' ability to change their minds as they learn more about themselves and their interests. In career-connected programs, students build this momentum through experiences with two complementary, overlapping, and interrelated goals: attaining credits toward a degree and preparing for a career. The extent to which programs emphasize one or both of these goals varies across profiled programs.

Attaining credits toward a postsecondary degree. Career-connected Early College gives students the opportunity to complete general education coursework requirements as well as major-aligned coursework linked to a career sector. All general education courses, and many major-aligned courses, are part of the [MassTransfer Block](#). In some Early College programs, all students take foundational general education courses such as Composition 101 and Introduction to Psychology before taking courses aligned to a career-connected pathway. In other programs, students immediately enroll in courses aligned to their career-connected pathway. What all career-connected Early College pathways have in common, however, is that they are built for students to earn between 12 and 60 credits. The following sample course sequences from Durfee High School illustrate what career-themed Early College pathways may look like in practice.

Sample Career-Themed Early College Pathways at Durfee High School

Criminal Justice Bridgewater State University	Community Translation Bristol Community College	STEM UMass Dartmouth
Grade 11 Fall Semester: Students take 1 course		
• Introduction to Criminal Justice	• Fundamentals of Public Speaking	• Intro to Arts and Sciences
Grade 11 Spring Semester: Students take 1-2 courses		
• American Government • Public Speaking	• State and Local Government • Intro to Criminal Justice	• Intro to American Politics or History of the US II • Intro to Data Science
Grade 12 Fall Semester: Students take 2 courses		
• Writing Rhetorically • Introduction to Psychology	• College Writing • Fundamentals of Interpreting and Translating	• Critical Writing and Reading I • Intro to Bioengineering
Grade 12 Spring Semester: Students take 2 courses		
• Social Problems • Intro to Sociology	• Spanish for Interpreters • Intercultural Communication	• Intro to Sustainability • Social Practice Topics I

*These pathways represent three of Durfee High's six Early College pathways in partnership with three higher education institutions.

Ensuring that students are ready to successfully participate in college coursework in high school is typically enabled by foundational skill development in early high school or even middle school, preparing students for college coursework in grades 10, 11, and 12. In some instances, programs may offer accelerated coursework in early high school to provide more space for college coursework in the upper grades. When they do, programs use multiple measures of readiness and significant student support to ensure Early College remains accessible to a wide range of students, not just those identified as advanced learners.

Overall, common experiences that support advancement toward a degree include:

- Instruction in college success skills, whether through courses, workshops, or Early College support courses
- General education Early College courses
- Sector-themed Early College course sequences, such as health care or business
- Summer or intersession college coursework to boost credit attainment

Preparing for a career. While students' college coursework can be a meaningful form of career preparation, equipping them with workforce-relevant knowledge and skills (and occasionally with industry-recognized certifications), career-connected Early College partnerships offer additional career preparation on a continuum, from less to more time-intensive experiences. At the less time-intensive end, students build career awareness through guest speakers and career fairs. As they progress, they dig deeper into career exploration: site visits, industry-designed challenges, and project-based learning tied to real-world problems. At the most time-intensive end is in-depth career preparation: internships, co-ops, opportunities to earn industry-recognized certifications, and other sustained work-based learning, which may take place during school hours, after school, or over the summer. Some partnerships open this range of experiences to any high school student, while others embed them specifically within an Early College pathway, and both high schools and higher education partners may be involved in providing these experiences. Where a partnership's offerings sit on this continuum, and how many students they reach, varies considerably across the programs profiled—but all are working to offer career-related experiences that build durable skills and complement students' academic coursework to promote well-rounded future readiness.

Some career-connected Early College partnerships focus on designing the Early College experience to accommodate student enrollment in additional pathway programs that emphasize career connection, like Innovation Career Pathways and Career Technical Education. The chance to enroll in Early College and another pathway program enables students to either deepen their learning and experience in one area of interest or explore different interests simultaneously. Early College students who engage in multiple pathways may earn fewer Early College credits than full-time Early College students, while still earning a minimum of 12 credits, but they typically engage in more immersive career-connected learning.

Overall, common experiences that facilitate career advancement include:

- Instruction in career success skills, whether through courses, workshops, or Early College support courses
- Innovation Career Pathways
- Career Technical Education programs
- Career-connected learning opportunities, such as:
 - Work-based learning experiences (e.g., internships)
 - High school or Early College courses in which students earn industry-recognized certifications (e.g., OSHA 10, Certified Nursing Assistant, Smart Building Technologies, Google IT Support Professional)
 - Industry-designed challenges

Collectively, these advancement opportunities allow students to take concrete steps toward a college major and career and gain key elements of future readiness: skills, confidence, and marketable experiences. All the while, students engage in deeper exploration and confirm or adjust their direction accordingly.

Together, experiences that facilitate exploration, reflection, and advancement are greater than the sum of their parts. Not only do they help students gain a sense of direction and build momentum toward a postsecondary goal, but they also foster students' personal development. Through career-connected Early College, students home in on a sense of purpose and agency that helps them become conscientious, ambitious, and capable across all of their future endeavors.



CASE STUDIES

Emerging Approaches to Career-Connected Early College

The five case studies that follow explore what career-connected Early College may look like in practice. These approaches are nascent and constantly evolving but provide promising examples of integrated college and career readiness in progress.

Each case study includes a schematic showing experiences students have access to throughout their secondary education that help them explore, reflect, and advance, as described above. The experiences shown are not mutually exclusive; Early College students typically engage in many of them. Note that these visuals portray the most notable experiences and are not intended to be exhaustive. Further, each experience is categorized by its main objective (i.e., Explore & Reflect or Advance) but may tackle multiple objectives.

BOSTON

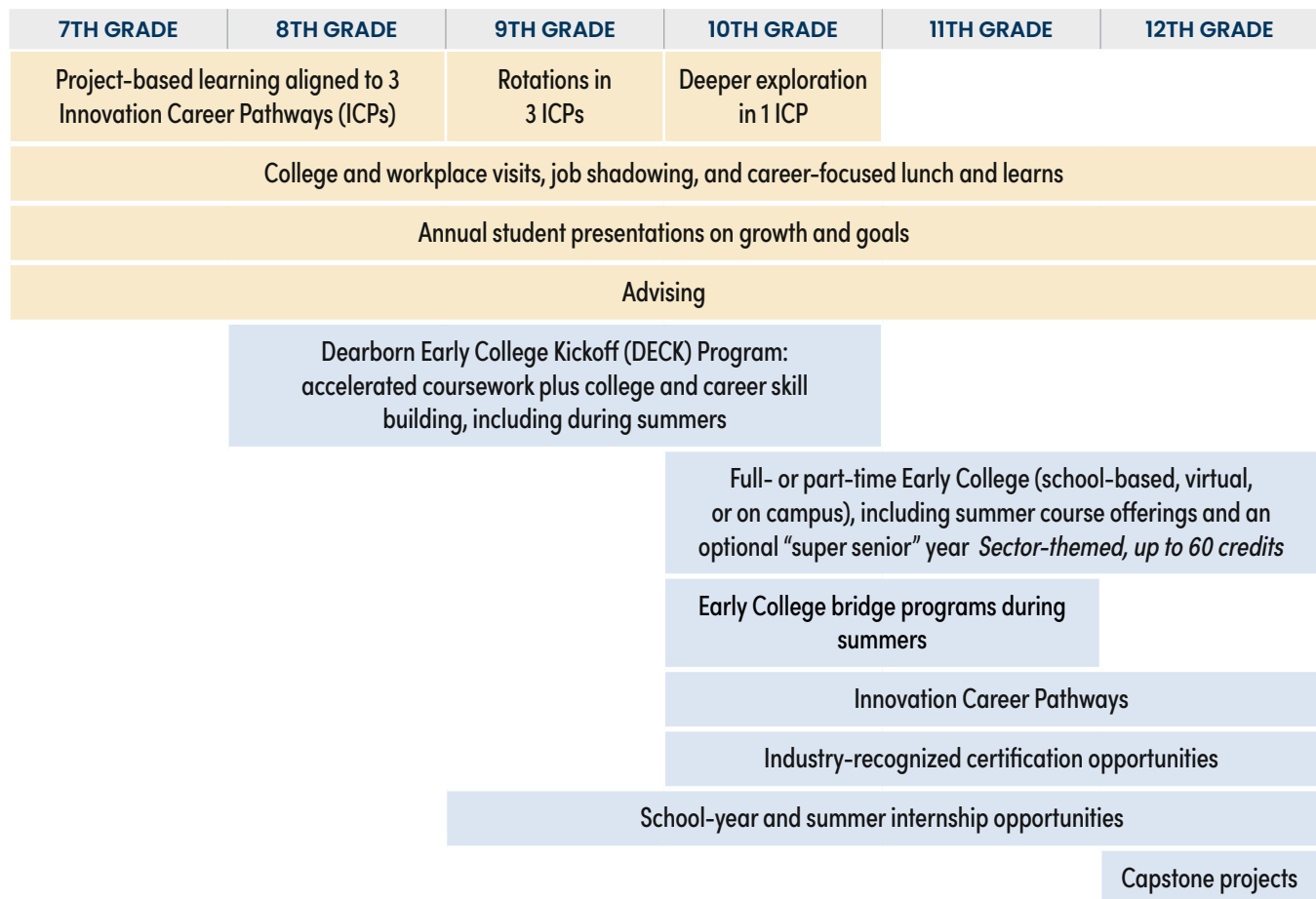
Dearborn STEM Academy

Building a whole-school culture of future readiness

For students who enroll at the Dearborn STEM Academy (DSA) in the Boston Public Schools, preparing for the future begins when the first school bell rings. By graduation, students leave with not only a clear sense of direction, but also significant momentum toward their postsecondary goals. Serving 565 students in grades 6–12, the STEM school’s educational model is carefully balanced, ensuring students meaningfully explore future plans and engage in extensive college- and career-aligned preparation. In partnership with Franklin Cummings Institute of Technology and Wentworth Institute of Technology, DSA has established an Early College program that is deeply linked to career readiness—one that enables students to earn an associate degree, experience work-based learning, and even jointly participate in Innovation Career Pathways. This approach took shape while Boston Plan for Excellence, Inc. (BPE) served as DSA’s Educational Management Organization, helping guide the school through a successful turnaround that concluded with its official exit from state turnaround status in June 2026. Underlying DSA’s approach is a powerful enabler: future readiness is the bedrock of the school’s culture.

Career-Connected Early College at Dearborn STEM Academy: Core Experiences

■ Explore & Reflect ■ Advance



INSIGHT 1: **At DSA, future readiness starts on day one.**

Opportunities for college and career exploration are baked into the standard DSA student experience beginning in middle school. Exposure to an Early College pathway begins in grade 7, when students have the option to enroll in the Dearborn Early College Kickoff (DECK) program—a multi-year program that prepares students for full-time Early College by grade 11 and the chance to earn an associate degree by graduation. DECK students participate in accelerated English Language Arts and Math courses during grades 8–10 and month-long summer bootcamps after grades 7–10, with stipends provided for summer learning. Throughout these experiences, the cohort also engages in college and career exploration and preparation. Students then begin taking Early College courses in grade 10, select their college major on “DECKlaration Day” at the end of grade 10, and may enroll in full-time Early College in grades 11–12.

At the same time, students are gradually introduced to the school’s three STEM-themed innovation pathways—Health and Life Sciences, Engineering, and Computer Science—through interdisciplinary project-based learning aligned to each pathway in grades 7 and 8, courses in each pathway in grade 9, and a more in-depth technical course in one pathway of their choosing in grade 10. These experiences are exploratory in nature, providing career exposure along with foundational knowledge and skills. After this point, students may officially join an Innovation Career Pathway in one of the three areas and go on to complete specialized instruction, industry-recognized certifications, and dual enrollment college courses.

The fact that these future-oriented experiences begin in middle school is critical, providing students ample time to explore different subjects and make significant progress along one or more pathways that interest them. Further, exposing students to Innovation Career Pathways and Early College at the same time allows students to make informed choices about their trajectory through high school and beyond.



INSIGHT 2: **Students don't have to choose between college and career.**

Students at DSA are able to participate in both Early College and Innovation Career Pathways, and many do. Approximately 50% of students in grades 10–12 enroll in Early College courses, and 80% of seniors complete an Innovation Career Pathway. Together, the pathways provide a chance for students to double down on an area of interest or explore something new. Some of the school's sector-themed Early College pathways complement the three Innovation Career Pathways, while others, like Criminal Justice, Business, Automotive Technology, and Liberal Arts, offer new frontiers.

Notably, career-connected learning experiences are embedded within, but not restricted to, specific pathway programs. Strong relationships with over a dozen industry partners and the Boston Private Industry Council (PIC) enable the school to offer paid internships to students across all high school grade levels, independent of their pathway. Many other industry-sponsored experiences, like the school's popular "lunch and learn" series, are open to all students. Opportunities to earn industry-recognized certifications also cut across pathways. In Grade 10, students participate in a technical course in either Health and Life Sciences, Engineering, or Computer Science. Regardless of which course they participate in, all students earn OSHA 10 certification through this course. Students can also enroll in college courses that confer certifications (e.g., Phlebotomy and Smart Building Technologies) through both Early College and Innovation Career Pathways. At DSA, college and career preparation is ubiquitous and accessible to all.

Enabling this wide range of experiences is DSA's proactive approach to workforce engagement. The school's Work-Based Learning Manager reaches out to employers with a menu of engagement options that invites them to support student learning in whatever form they prefer—from conducting mock interviews to co-designing curricula to offering internships. The Work-Based Learning Manager then partners with employers to design experiences that link to students' classroom learning. Consequently, these experiences facilitate meaningful exploration and advancement along postsecondary pathways. For instance, one student interested in engineering was able to participate in two internships, one in quality assurance and one in interior design. Both built her confidence in professional interactions, and in comparing the experiences, she realized she preferred the work environment of the latter. As a result, she is considering pursuing an interior design degree after high school.

INSIGHT 3: **Each student's journey is tailored to their interests.**

Because DSA offers so many experiences geared toward college and career readiness, students are able to assemble opportunities like bricks on a custom path to their postsecondary goals. Early College pathways feature many on-ramps; students may join the pre- Early College DECK program in middle school or opt into Early College at any point in high school, and they may enroll in college courses part-time or full-time. Students can also switch from Innovation Career Pathways to Early College or pursue both, and they can supplement either with dual enrollment college courses at Roxbury Community College and Bunker Hill Community College. DSA provides structured pathways with enough flexibility that students can adjust their trajectory as they refine their interests and aspirations. For example, after exploring the STEM-themed

innovation pathways, one student in the DECK program decided not to pursue an Innovation Career Pathway and to focus solely on Early College. She later switched her major from social work to psychology and early childhood education as she homed in on her goals—forging a path that was distinctly her own while staying on track to earn an associate degree by graduation.

In support of this customization, DSA provides consistent one-on-one advising with school staff and a Boston PIC adviser. Early College students check in formally with staff at the end of each semester and informally on a more frequent basis for guidance on course selection and career-connected learning opportunities. The school's Work-Based Learning Manager meets regularly with students to encourage reflection about their goals, using the resume-building process to discuss transferable skills and identify interests students wish to pursue further. This strong focus on advising carries beyond graduation, as the Dearborn NEXT program connects each student with a postsecondary counselor for six years after they leave DSA.

INSIGHT 4: **Dedicated staff capacity enables robust college and career pathways.**

As DSA has built its college and career pathways, people power has been critical. Through the school's partnership with BPE, a dedicated team of staff has provided DSA with the bandwidth to carry out their integrated college and career model, as BPE staff have been instrumental in delivering student support, procuring grants for work-based learning, and developing workforce partnerships. With this high level of staff support, the school's Director of Early College and Career Pathways was able to gradually extend their Early College program from grades 11–12 back to the early high school and middle school grades (i.e., the DECK program). As DSA exits state receivership and ends their partnership with BPE, the school's staffing is undergoing changes, but their work to date highlights the importance of dedicated staff capacity in establishing career-connected Early College pathways.

THE BOTTOM LINE

By beginning to focus on future readiness in middle school, the Dearborn STEM Academy has created a long runway for college and career exploration and preparation, enabling an Early College program that builds to an associate degree and dovetails with Innovation Career Pathways. Their robust industry partnerships support career-connected learning woven throughout the high school experience, ensuring that Early College students develop a well-rounded foundation for postsecondary success.

FALL RIVER

B.M.C. Durfee High School

Blending college and career readiness at a comprehensive high school

For comprehensive high schools with thousands of students and many programs, meaningfully integrating college and career preparation takes a healthy dose of strategic thinking and innovation—and B.M.C. Durfee High School in Fall River has risen to the challenge. Not only has their Early College partnership expanded to six career-themed pathways across three higher education partners (Bristol Community College, Bridgewater State University, and the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth), but the school has also begun to offer internships aligned with students' Early College pathways. On top of this, staff have worked to ensure that Early College is accessible to students participating in Career Technical Education. The result is a school community with a growing, multi-faceted focus on postsecondary success and a palpable enthusiasm for Early College among students and staff.

Career-Connected Early College at B.M.C. Durfee High School: Core Experiences

Explore & Reflect Advance

9TH GRADE	10TH GRADE	11TH GRADE	12TH GRADE
Career Technical Education exploratory course	Early College exploratory course, including college visits		
College- and industry-affiliated speakers, college and career readiness workshops, and college visits			
		OneGoal course featuring reflection and advising	
School counseling sessions focused on college and career readiness			
		Part-time Early College (school-based or virtual), including summer course offerings <i>Sector-themed, ~21 credits</i>	
Career Technical Education pathways*			
School-year and summer internship and co-op opportunities			
			Capstone projects

*Approximately 25% of Early College students at Durfee participate in a Career Technical Education pathway.

INSIGHT 1: Durfee's Early College program centers on defined, sector-themed academic pathways plus complementary career-connected learning opportunities.

Early College students at Durfee enroll in an academic pathway with a clear theme aligned to a skilled career sector: Health Science, Community Translation, Criminal Justice, Education and Social Service Leadership, STEM, or Business. Each pathway features approximately seven courses with one to three offered per semester in grades 11 and 12, typically including at least one major course and one general education course per semester. Student interests influence the courses offered. For instance, STEM students complete an interest survey to inform whether upcoming STEM courses will focus on computer science or engineering.

The clearly defined structure of each pathway ensures each student's learning is cohesive and builds meaningfully toward a college degree aligned to a specific industry.

While many of the academic pathways feature opportunities to complete capstone projects and earn industry-recognized certifications, the school also creates space for Early College students to engage in additional career-connected learning. For instance, staff are working to expand internship opportunities—currently available to all students—that often relate to the six Early College pathway themes. In the past, STEM internships have been offered through Johnson & Johnson, and Early College students in the Business and Digital Marketing pathway have completed co-ops at the Fall River Museum of Contemporary Art. Early College staff also work closely with the school's Career Technical Education (CTE) team to ensure that the nearly 25% of Early College students who also participate in CTE are able to fully take advantage of both programs.

“It truly takes a village to build Early College as a launchpad for our students. When school and district leaders, educators, families, college partners, and community members all believe in what's possible for our students and work together to make it happen, we can create opportunities that no one person or department could build alone. It's this broad-based network of support and collective vision that enables our students to explore post-secondary pathways, build confidence, gain real-world experience, and step confidently into their futures.”

DREW WOODWARD

Director of School Counseling and Pathway Development at Fall River Public Schools

EMMA JACINTHO

Early College Coordinator at B.M.C. Durfee High School

INSIGHT 2: **Students engage in guided self-examination that promotes intentional planning for the future.**

Thanks to a partnership with OneGoal, Early College students at Durfee attend a course three times per week, on the days when their college courses do not meet, that scaffolds deep reflection on their learning experiences and future plans. The OneGoal curriculum prompts students to closely examine their interests, strengths, and aspirations in their junior year and to dig deep into postsecondary pathways that match their aspirations in their senior year. The course incorporates action planning and one-on-one advising with the OneGoal-trained teacher, who serves as a vital source of guidance and support throughout students' Early College journeys. As a result of the course, students learn to move forward with intention in high school and beyond. Some even change their Early College pathway between their junior and senior years based on what they learn about themselves in the course, highlighting its power to help students refine their aspirations. Further, the OneGoal course trains students to identify transferable skills they have gained through their college- and career-connected experiences, ensuring that any pivot feels less like starting over and more like a new chapter where they can apply all they have learned.

INSIGHT 3: **Tactical scheduling supports students' ability to participate in both college and career pathway opportunities.**

Enabling Durfee's multi-dimensional approach to future readiness is thoughtful scheduling, which in turn is enabled by strong relationships with the school's three higher education partners. Early College staff at Durfee work with their collegiate counterparts to ensure all Early College courses are offered during the school's last two periods of the day, either on Monday and Wednesday or Tuesday and Thursday, and either at Durfee or online. While it can be challenging to find professors with availability to teach the desired courses within these specified windows, the approach is highly advantageous for students. It creates a predictable structure that allows students to fit other experiences into their schedules, like CTE, and students are able to spend the afternoons that do not have college courses participating in their OneGoal course, capstone projects, or internships.

INSIGHT 4: **Scaling at a strategic pace, with broad-based buy-in, is crucial to the program's success.**

Durfee piloted its Early College program with one higher education partner, then expanded to a second, then a third. This growth has enabled them to add more career-themed academic pathways that are aligned with students' interests and regional workforce needs, including the in-demand STEM pathway. It has also enabled the school to access a larger pool of professors who are available to teach courses live, while strengthening pipelines to the three institutions most attended by Durfee graduates. Critically, this growth happened at a strategic pace. Durfee's Early College team only added a third partner once their internal team had added two full-time staff, ensuring they had the capacity to carry out the expansion successfully.

Growing their internal team required buy-in from district administrators, and the team generated that buy-in from the bottom up. By providing stipends for teachers who support Early College courses, espousing the benefits of Early College to department heads, and broadly sharing the program's outcomes, the team has created a positive buzz at multiple levels of leadership—a major accomplishment that lays the foundation for continued success. Now, the school community is excited to see the program advance its upward and outward trajectory, opening doors to postsecondary success for more students.

THE BOTTOM LINE

For a comprehensive high school juggling many priorities, B.M.C. Durfee High School has developed an Early College program that engages students in an impressive range of experiences, from deep exploration to career-themed course sequences to career-connected learning—all while helping students make sense of their learning and map out their future plans through structured reflection. Widespread buy-in and strategic expansion have laid the groundwork for continued growth of the program's reach and impact.

Whittier Regional Vocational Technical High School

Establishing college-going experiences in a vocational-technical setting

Whittier Regional Vocational Technical High School launched their Early College partnership with Northern Essex Community College (NECC) in 2018 with a deep-seated belief in the promise of Early College programming for vocational-technical students. For the approximately 50% of Whittier students who go on to attend an institution of higher education,¹³ Early College provides invaluable preparation. For students who had not previously considered higher education, Early College serves as a gateway to a new and complementary opportunity. For all students, Early College deepens their vocational-technical education. Whether a student's shop focuses on construction and transportation, manufacturing and technology, or health and human services, among others, Early College offers advanced coursework and interdisciplinary perspectives that complement their learning or facilitate exploration. By carefully crafting their Early College model to accommodate shop schedules and offer on-campus courses, Whittier has meaningfully strengthened their focus on future readiness and expanded the realm of possibilities for their students.

Career-Connected Early College at Whittier RVT High School: Core Experiences

Explore & Reflect Advance

9TH GRADE	10TH GRADE	11TH GRADE	12TH GRADE
Vocational-technical exploratory course			
Advising			
Vocational-technical pathway (i.e., "shop")			
Part-time Early College (on campus), including intersession and summer course offerings General education, 12+ credits			
Co-op opportunities			
College and career success workshops at Northern Essex Community College			

INSIGHT 1: For Whittier students, Early College courses provide a valuable new means of exploration and preparation.

Whittier has designed their Early College program as a general education pathway, offering courses like English Composition, Introduction to Business, and Introduction to Criminal Justice that enable students to explore subjects that interest them while building college readiness skills. Student interest surveys and input from shop teachers inform the specific courses offered, and student preferences are taken into

account when making course enrollment decisions. Some students choose to take courses that align with or complement their shop—for instance, culinary students may enroll in Introduction to Business because they hope to open their own restaurant someday. Others take courses in subjects unrelated to their shop as a way to try something new. In any case, these experiences help students refine their interests and gain clarity on their future vision—one health student, for example, learned through a public health course that she is more interested in health policy than medical practice.

As they explore, Early College students also develop critical college success skills that prepare them for the rigors of advanced coursework. For many, this builds their confidence and fosters a college-going identity. The impact is tangible: many Whittier students have reported that participation in Early College opened their eyes to new possibilities and changed their minds about future plans.

INSIGHT 2: **The switch to on-campus courses strengthened the student experience.**

A few years into their partnership, Whittier and NECC made the decision to offer all Early College courses on NECC's campus. Buses would make the three-mile drive to and from the campus four mornings per week, every day except Friday, so that students could attend their courses. The feedback from students was overwhelmingly positive. Students expressed feeling more engaged, more independent, and more connected to the college community, and they observed that professors appeared more “in their element” and treated them like regular college students. Overall, on-campus courses let students experience firsthand the realities of a college environment and the high expectations that accompany it—leading students to rise to the challenge and more clearly envision a college-bound future.

Logistically, a switch to the on-campus approach made it easier to find professors who were willing to teach Early College courses. When the travel back from NECC's campus in the morning threatened to interfere with high school instructional time, Whittier staff assigned students an early lunch block to mitigate the issue. Spending more time on campus also presented an opportunity for additional college and career skill building, with NECC hosting a series of workshops for Early College students on topics like using LinkedIn and avoiding plagiarism.

INSIGHT 3: **Whittier's and NECC's custom schedule accommodates vocational-technical learning.**

To deliver academic classes and shop classes to 1,200 students, Whittier's schedule is complex, featuring alternating academic weeks and shop weeks, with each “week” stretching from Wednesday to Tuesday. Additionally, students are divided into two groups, with the “A group” completing their academic week while the “B group” completes their shop week. To fit Early College courses into this structure, Whittier and NECC designed hybrid courses to meet twice per week on students' academic weeks—either Thursday and Tuesday or Wednesday and Monday—and identified professors who were willing to teach two sections of each course, with the sections meeting on opposite weeks. Courses meet asynchronously on the other three days

of the academic week. Whittier and NECC continue to pursue ways to support professors with the every-other-week instructional pace, ensuring the innovative schedule continues to work for both students and faculty.

INSIGHT 4: **Vocational-technical students carry unique strengths into Early College programs.**

Because their secondary education has been focused on career preparation from the get-go, vocational-technical students possess future-oriented skills and attitudes that serve them well in college settings—and that has been on full display among Whittier’s Early College students. NECC faculty report that Whittier students enter their classrooms with strong durable skills and also more readily connect their classroom learning to their postsecondary plans. The students are primed to treat college preparation as career preparation, integrating the two in ways that augment their own future readiness.

Recognizing this strength, Whittier and NECC seek to extend the opportunity to participate in Early College to a diverse range of students, including those who may not have considered higher education previously. They carry out an intentional recruitment process, casting a wide net and reaching out to teachers and students to identify who may be a good fit. They continue to refine their readiness assessment based on what they learn from students’ experiences. Whittier also provides Early College preparatory sessions for students who need additional support, reducing barriers to participation. In these ways, Whittier and NECC equitably expand access to opportunity and success.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The partnership between Whittier and NECC demonstrates the value of Early College for vocational-technical students, complementing their shops to provide well-rounded, future-focused learning experiences. By leaning into the strengths of vocational-technical students and navigating unique scheduling dynamics, Whittier and NECC have developed a thoughtful approach that enables course-taking directly on NECC’s campus. In doing so, they have made possible meaningful college-going experiences for their students, expanding available pathways to college and career success.

GARDNER

Gardner High School

Enabling deep college and career preparation through student-centered pathways

Students who participate in the Early College partnership between Gardner High School and Mount Wachusett Community College (MWCC) boast an impressive statistic: the average number of college credits earned per student during the 2024–2025 school year was not 12, not 24, but an impressive 36, with many students completing at least three college courses per semester during grades 11 and 12. A small cohort even earn 60 credits: through the Pathways Early College Experience, twenty students per year enroll in college courses full-time during their junior and senior years and complete an associate degree. The high credit-earning potential of Gardner and MWCC’s Early College pathways is a core enabler of their career-connected approach—this depth of credits means students are able to move beyond general education courses to specialized courses that align to specific college majors and careers. In choosing which courses to make available, Gardner and MWCC place students’ interests at the forefront and customize each student’s academic trajectory as much as possible, promoting robust college and career readiness that fit together seamlessly.

Career-Connected Early College at Gardner High School: Core Experiences

Explore & Reflect Advance

9TH GRADE	10TH GRADE	11TH GRADE	12TH GRADE
College and career exploratory course	Early College First Year Experience course		
	College and workplace visits and college- and industry-affiliated speakers		
		Early College advisory sessions	
	Early College shared advising model		
		Full- or part-time Early College (school-based or on campus), including summer course offerings Sector-themed, up to 60 credits	
		Industry-recognized certification offerings	
		College success workshops	

INSIGHT 1: MWCC's regional approach to Early College enables a wide variety of course offerings.

Gardner is not alone in partnering with MWCC to deliver Early College programming. Fitchburg Public Schools, Leominster Public Schools, Sizer School, Fitchburg State University (FSU), Gardner, and MWCC applied for and were awarded a single Early College designation in 2019, operating as a consortium. Since then, additional designations have been awarded involving Athol Public Schools, Clinton Public Schools, and Narragansett Regional School District in partnership with MWCC and FSU. The joint regional initiative has created an economy of scale; the larger pool of Early College students has made it easier to fill courses, enabling MWCC to expand the slate of courses that offer half or full sections for Early College students. Consequently, there is space for students to pursue whichever career-themed pathway best aligns with their interests—STEM, Criminal Justice, Business, Health Care, or Liberal Arts—and to pursue courses within the pathway that support their future goals.

INSIGHT 2: The partnership's pathways are designed to accommodate both employer needs and student interests.

When Gardner and MWCC set out to build their Early College pathways, they first turned to labor market data. In selecting pathway themes, they prioritized local industries with immediate workforce needs, such as health care. They then worked to build course sequences aligned to college degrees that would prepare students for careers in those industries. Staff ensured that the sequences offered transferability, recognizing that it is normal for students to adjust and refine their trajectory, and enabled students to meet high school graduation requirements, as most students would be taking 12 or more college courses and would need dual credit in order to earn their high school diploma.



Gardner and MWCC continue to monitor workforce needs and modify pathways on an ongoing basis to match student interests. The partners have adopted a practice of surveying students every year on their aspirations and what they hope to learn through Early College. This input informs course offerings for the coming year, ensuring that learning opportunities are engaging and relevant.

Further, Gardner and MWCC also grant students flexibility to take courses outside of their pathway that interest them, coordinating closely with their Early College adviser to make such decisions. In this way, college courses may serve as a supplemental source of exploration. For instance, a student in the health care pathway could take a business course, or a student in the STEM pathway could take a criminal justice course. Because students typically take a high number of college courses, they are able to engage in such exploration while still making significant progress along their pathway.

As students advance further along their pathway, opportunities for customization increase. Not only can students choose from a wide range of Early College courses offered in a cohort model, but they also have the option to enroll in a “single seat” in virtually any MWCC course, provided they meet any prerequisite requirements. Overall, students are able to tailor their academic trajectory to their specific goals, much like they will do in college. Importantly, students receive scaffolding as they chart their course. Their Early College advisers—staff from Gardner and MWCC who engage in shared advising—work with them one-on-one to select courses, navigate scheduling, and ensure high school graduation requirements are met. Additionally, students typically complete many cohort-based Early College courses before considering a “single seat” in a non-cohort-based course, enabling them to develop a foundation for success.

INSIGHT 3: **MWCC plays a powerful role in delivering career-connected learning.**

In implementing a career-connected Early College program, MWCC recognizes that career-connected learning is not the sole responsibility of the high school partner. Institutions of higher education are well positioned to embed career-connected learning into their courses—whether by recruiting industry professionals to co-teach courses, engaging industry partners in curriculum development, incorporating industry-designed projects into course syllabi, or adopting a host of other strategies. In MWCC’s case, staff are working to offer courses that give students the chance to earn valuable industry-recognized certifications. For instance, seven Gardner students completed a Certified Nurse Assistant (CNA) course at MWCC in 2026. The CNA certification includes clinical experience that students often need to apply to two- or four-year nursing programs, and it is a stackable credential within a longer nursing pathway at MWCC that includes a number of Early College courses. Gardner and MWCC overcame scheduling and staffing challenges to offer the CNA course and used creative funding strategies like leveraging Gardner’s Early College Support Grant to cover students’ certification exam fees. The result was an experience that delivered highly specialized preparation for college and career success.

INSIGHT 4: Early College advisory is a popular and valuable component of the student experience.

When Gardner students were asked to identify the most beneficial part of their Early College experience, they pointed to a small component that punches above its weight: Early College advisory. These small-group meetings, held four times per semester during students' junior and senior years, provide space for students to research college majors and careers, consider their aspirations, and reflect on their learning. The value is not to be understated. These sessions are when students, with the support of their peers, make sense of their experiences and take stock of the momentum they are building toward their future goals. Students' overwhelming embrace of these sessions is a testament to the importance of structured reflection and peer support in helping students to develop a clear direction for their future.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The opportunity to earn 36, 48, or even 60 college credits while in high school is a rare one that enables deep college and career preparation. Through a regional partnership with Mount Wachusett Community College, Gardner High School has delivered that opportunity. Grounding their pathways in local workforce needs, the school offers a wide variety of Early College courses, some of which include the chance to earn industry-recognized certifications. By allowing students flexibility to choose among the courses offered, with consistent guidance from high school and college advisers, the school foregrounds students' interests and supports them in making meaningful headway toward their college and career goals.

SHEFFIELD

Mount Everett Regional School

Championing the value of “college for career” in a rural district

As the only public secondary school in the southern Berkshire region, which encompasses five rural towns, Mount Everett Regional School is tasked with preparing virtually all of the area’s youth for future success. Recognizing this great responsibility, the school has doubled down on expanding college and career pathway options in recent years, while focusing on how best to integrate the two to create an innovative, well-rounded high school experience for all students. The school partnered with Simon’s Rock at Bard College initially and later with the University of Massachusetts Amherst to establish a “wall-to-wall” or full-school Early College model, where all students participate in Early College courses. Notably, this Early College partnership was the first for UMass Amherst, the flagship campus of the state’s public university system. Mount Everett also pursued multiple Innovation Career Pathway designations, and the two programs together enabled the school to reinvent the high school experience, foregrounding hands-on learning and real-world problem-solving in service of college and career readiness.

Now, students at Mount Everett participate in an academic pathway of their choosing—such as Liberal Arts, Manufacturing, or Entrepreneurship—that incorporates some degree of college preparation, experiential learning, and career-oriented technical training. By capitalizing on its small size, Mount Everett is able to deliver robust advising and tailor students’ experiences within these pathways to their individual interests and goals as much as possible. As a result, Mount Everett’s educational model has opened doors for students that many never knew existed, establishing a newfound college-going culture in the region and promoting all students’ future success.

Career-Connected Early College at Mount Everett Regional School: Core Experiences

■ Explore & Reflect ■ Advance

9TH GRADE	10TH GRADE	11TH GRADE	12TH GRADE
College visits			
Workplace visits and college- and industry-affiliated speakers			
Hands-on learning in high school courses			
Daily advisory block			
Advising			
	Introduction to College course	Part-time Early College (virtual or school-based) Sector-aligned, up to 30 credits	
	Innovation Career Pathways		
		Capstone projects, independent studies, and school-year internships	

INSIGHT 1: Through careful trust-building, Mount Everett achieved a major shift in the community's attitudes toward college.

Many in the Southern Berkshire community were hesitant about launching an Early College program. As a rural community with a tradition of family-run businesses, many were concerned that college pathways would result in more students leaving the region for higher education, only to move away permanently. Others worried that college coursework would be too challenging and leave students feeling deflated. Mount Everett staff, operating with a deep understanding of their community, validated these reservations and worked to establish trust, in part through careful messaging. They outlined an equity-centered argument for Early College, emphasizing that the region's students deserved the same opportunities as students anywhere else, and they highlighted the financial importance of "college for career," noting that college degrees are linked to significantly higher earnings and increased economic mobility that benefit students and their families. As a result of their messaging and efforts to build a program that was responsive to the community's concerns, buy-in for the program has continued to build. Contributing to this shift is the fact that the school opted for a wall-to-wall model. Because students are automatically enrolled in Early College and do not need to actively opt in, college learning experiences have become the norm, not the exception. Consequently, a newfound college-going culture is taking hold in the region, benefiting students, employers, and the community at large.

INSIGHT 2: College and career preparation are embedded in the fabric of the school.

As the only public high school in the region, Mount Everett does it all. Their program offerings feature an expansive set of college- and career-themed pathways: Art, Entrepreneurship, Global Education, and Liberal Arts, along with three state-designated Innovation Career Pathways in Manufacturing, Technology, and



Clean Energy. Each pathway features a structured sequence of classes, including Early College courses, and most feature experiential learning experiences like internships, capstone projects, and service learning. Additional course offerings are available through the school's Vocational Department in areas like culinary arts, early childhood education, and building construction, as well as through dual enrollment partnerships. These additional offerings are either built into the aforementioned pathways or serve as standalone, complementary learning opportunities. The vast majority of students participate in at least one of the pathways, and Early College courses—in which all students participate—provide a valuable way to deepen their learning and preparation for the future. In this way, promoting college and career readiness is Mount Everett's *modus operandi*.

Reinforcing this future-oriented approach, Mount Everett incorporates a high degree of hands-on learning into its courses, adopting a polytechnic model that combines rigorous academics with technical skill development and applied learning. The school also invites alumni to speak to students about postsecondary pathways, and organizes college visits for students in grades 8 and 9. Importantly, Mount Everett does not differentiate between college preparation and career preparation, instead adopting an ethos of *future preparation* that acknowledges the deep connections between college and career.

INSIGHT 3: **Because the student body is small, individualization is possible.**

Across and within Mount Everett's career themed pathways, there is a considerable amount of flexibility for students to chart a course that best fits their interests. Students are able to pursue multiple pathways simultaneously—for instance, the Entrepreneurship pathway and the Innovation Career Pathway in Clean Energy—and students are encouraged to try classes that match their interests beyond their selected pathways. While many Early College courses are baked into specific pathways, students can also customize their Early College course selections to explore particular interests or advance toward their postsecondary goals. For instance, a student who is interested in nursing may choose to take an anatomy and physiology Early College course, which is not affiliated with a specific career-themed pathway at the school.

To support students in selecting a pathway and an intentional set of Early College and high school courses, robust advising is critical—and the school's small size, with only 40 students per grade on average, makes this possible. The school's Early College director works closely with students to identify their interests and then choose pathways and courses that align with those interests. The director also works to connect students to suitable capstone experiences and internships, even if doing so means establishing new workforce partnerships. Through personalized advising, Mount Everett works to ensure that each students' experiences balance exploration and progression along a specific postsecondary pathway.

INSIGHT 4: **Folding the management of college and career pathways into one role promotes integration.**

An advantageous feature of Mount Everett's Early College model, enabled by the school's small size, is the fact that the Early College director also manages the school's Innovation Career Pathways, facilitating the



integration of college- and career-connected learning. Between the two programs, the director (a Mount Everett alumna) designs pathways that feature advanced coursework, industry-recognized certification opportunities, workplace visits, and capstone projects and internships, all aligned with specific industries. By assigning these programs to a single staff member, the school helps to operationalize “college for career.” The director is well-equipped to advise students on the range of college and career readiness experiences the school offers and to design pathways that match student interests and labor market needs.

The Early College director is also working to expand the school’s internship offerings. About one-quarter of students complete an internship during high school, some during their Early College block on the “off days” when their college courses don’t meet. The director continues to pursue workforce partnerships to increase that figure, providing students with valuable work-based learning that complements and expands upon their academic courses.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Mount Everett Regional School’s Early College partnership has made waves in the region, establishing new pathways to and through higher education that hold promise for increasing economic mobility across the Southern Berkshires. The school’s comprehensive emphasis on future readiness, integrated approach to college and career experiences, and ability to individualize students’ trajectories have enabled a robust career-connected Early College program with a significant impact. The model is a testament to the power of the “college for career” ethos in advancing a college-going culture and expanding equitable access to higher education for all students.

Key Considerations and Enabling Conditions for Career-Connected Early College

The Early College partnerships highlighted in this report represent an array of high school types: a STEM-focused school, large and mid-sized comprehensive high schools, a vocational-technical school, and a wall-to-wall Early College school. Despite their differing contexts, their programs reveal a set of shared considerations for designing career-connected Early College partnerships.

KEY CONSIDERATION

Design Early College Pathways to be Permeable

As students progress through high school, solidify their sense of self, and reflect on their experiences, they are likely to refine their vision for the future and may wish to change their area of focus within Early College. Acknowledging that this is a normal part of the process of self-discovery, career-connected Early College pathways should be designed with some degree of permeability, allowing students to switch from one pathway to another. The benefit: students do not end up locked into a pathway that they know no longer interests them. The trade-off: when students switch paths, they sacrifice some depth for breadth, spending more time exploring and less time advancing down a single pathway. To ensure a balanced approach to exploration and advancement, programs may wish to strive for measured permeability, such as by establishing discrete inflection points when students could switch among pathways.

Strategies that support pathway permeability include:

- **Starting pathways as early as possible.** When pathways begin early, students are able to switch their pathway and still have time to engage in deep, specialized preparation in their new pathway. In other words, a longer runway minimizes the downsides of changing tracks. Pathways can even begin in middle school through career awareness and exploration, accelerated coursework, and foundational college and career skill-building.
- **Engaging students in robust exploratory experiences.** The more students are able to explore college and career pathways, the more likely they are to realize a latent desire to switch pathways earlier on, allowing time to meaningfully advance along their new pathway. Many Early College partnerships profiled in this report offer in-depth exploratory courses in the early high school years for programs like Early College, Innovation Career Pathways, and Career Technical Education, allowing students to experience the various pathway themes therein.
- **Designing course sequences to progress from general education courses to major courses.** Beginning with general education courses provides students with a valuable means of exploration, increasing the chance that a desired pathway change would be made before a student advances to major-specific coursework. This ensures that students maximize the utility of their Early College courses to advance toward a major, building momentum they can carry into postsecondary life.

THE ESSENTIAL ROLE OF ADVISING IN CAREER-CONNECTED EARLY COLLEGE

For all three key considerations highlighted in this section, high-touch advising that delivers personalized guidance to Early College students is critical. To consolidate their learning and make sound choices about their pathway, students need a strong relationship with a trusted adult who engages them in guided exploration and reflection and who scaffolds the decision-making process.¹⁴ Only then can students adeptly exercise agency over their learning, pinpoint the transferable skills they have gained, and navigate decisions about their trajectory. Advisers must know their students deeply and therefore need adequate bandwidth to build strong interpersonal bonds. This is a notable strength of Early College partnerships, which typically feature dedicated Early College advisers employed by high schools and, occasionally, higher education partners. A robust approach to advising remains crucially important for the efficacy of career-connected Early College programs.

KEY CONSIDERATION

Balance Structure and Flexibility

Building an Early College pathway calls for juggling two priorities. On the one hand, students have diverse interests, so pathways should be fluid, allowing students to complete courses and career-connected learning experiences that are most relevant to their aspirations. On the other hand, pathways with defined structures, like fixed course sequences and pre-set career-connected opportunities, lend themselves to implementation at scale and ensure students build meaningful momentum toward a clear destination. Career-connected Early College programs should strive to balance these priorities, offering clear structure while customizing each student's experiences to match their goals, to the extent possible. The Early College partnerships profiled in this report have all worked to achieve this balance, incorporating some degree of student choice within career-themed pathways.

Strategies that support this balanced approach include:

- **Considering student input and labor market needs in designing pathway themes and course sequences.** By surveying students about their college and career interests and preferences for course offerings, Early College partnerships can build structured pathways that are tailored to what students wish to learn. At the same time, it is important to ensure that pathways meet local labor market needs, benefiting students (as future job-seekers) as well as employers.
- **Offering students a choice of Early College courses.** Within a structured Early College course sequence, strategic opportunities for student choice can be built in. Some partnerships allow students to choose which courses they would like to enroll in from a pathway-aligned shortlist. Others enable students to try out a single course within another pathway that aligns with their interests, space permitting. And some have built pathways that reach 24, 32, or even 60 credits—allowing students to advance beyond structured sequences of general education courses and foundational major courses to arrive at advanced major courses and electives, where students typically have the ability to select their own courses.

- **Expanding major-aligned course offerings.** Pathways are often able to introduce more choice and flexibility once students have completed general education courses and moved on to major courses. When they have more major courses available to them, students are better able to customize their program of study to their specific interests and goals. Partnerships have sought to expand major course offerings in multiple ways, such as enabling students to enroll in college courses via “single seats”; supplementing Early College offerings with relevant dual enrollment courses; and/or adopting a regional approach to Early College across multiple designated high school partners, pooling students from multiple high schools so that more courses can be offered and filled. With any of these options, it is important to continue providing robust support to help students navigate a wide array of potential courses.
- **Customizing work-based learning opportunities.** For many Early College partnerships, students and their advisers work together to identify individualized opportunities for internships, co-ops, and capstone projects that will deepen their learning, expand their horizons, and align with their goals. This approach helps students tailor their pathway so that it best prepares them for the future they envision.

KEY CONSIDERATION

Emphasize Transferable Skills

Even when Early College pathways are designed to be permeable and to balance structure and flexibility, the reality is that students’ college and career preparation may not align perfectly with their interests and aspirations. Especially given the popularity of Early College and the ongoing expansion of the model, space may be too limited for students to participate in their first-choice pathway, and the same may be true for Innovation Career Pathways and Career Technical Education programs. As students engage in college courses and career-connected learning in any pathway, it is important to help them identify the transferable skills they are gaining along the way. This helps students understand the relevance of the program to their future plans and learn how

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

When factoring these key considerations into program design, it is important to recall that career-connected Early College approaches are emerging and evolving, and a consensus on the most effective designs has not been reached. For that reason, every partnership profiled in this report adopted a continuous improvement mentality—a consistent willingness to test new approaches, gather data to assess their efficacy, and change course as needed, with a particular emphasis on student-informed design and implementation. As a result, every partnership has undertaken significant changes to their programs. For instance, DSA’s DECK program began as an accelerated summer learning program and later became year-round; Durfee’s partnership with UMass Dartmouth first offered an Arts and Fashion pathway that was reconfigured to a Business and Digital Marketing pathway due to low interest; and Whittier’s decision to move college courses onto NECC’s campus amounted to a remodel of the entire student experience. A commitment to continuous improvement ensures that career-connected Early College approaches will be strengthened and refined over time, allowing the most effective practices to surface.

to market their experiences to institutions of higher education and employers. It also ensures that, should they switch pathways at any point, they maximize the value of their previous experiences and do not lose momentum. Structured reflection activities—through advising, MyCAP, advisory, and/or Early College support courses—play a major role in emphasizing students’ transferable skills.

Through their trials and triumphs, the profiled partnerships also reveal a set of enabling conditions that make it possible to implement a career-connected Early College model and meaningfully integrate college and career preparation. Partnerships should seek to achieve these conditions to the extent possible, and policymakers and education leaders aim to promote them as they expand access to Early College programming.

ENABLING CONDITION

People

- **Higher education faculty with availability to teach Early College courses:** When professors lack the availability to fit Early College sections into their schedules, Early College partnerships may not be able to offer their desired courses, making it difficult to plan intentional course sequences. While this is a challenge for Early College partnerships in general, it is especially noteworthy for career-connected Early College programs—since these programs tend to offer more specialized courses, the pool of faculty available to teach the courses is smaller, meaning challenges with one faculty member’s availability may have an outsized impact and make it difficult to offer cohesive, career-themed sequences of courses. Professors’ availability may be constrained by contract restrictions and competing demands on their time, especially since some Early College courses require traveling off-campus to high school settings. Compensation can also be a barrier; for instance, professionals like nursing staff who may be well-suited to teach certification-bearing Early College courses might not find pay rates attractive compared to the wages they could earn in the field. Notably, college faculty are more likely to work around availability challenges if they have strong onboarding into Early College programs and ongoing support with instructing high school students, potentially through collaboration with high school educators.
- **Dedicated Early College high school staff:** Virtually all of the partnerships profiled in this report expressed the critical importance of employing dedicated Early College staff within the high school and/or district. For many, increasing the number of Early College staff or transitioning staff from part-time to full-time was a major enabler of program improvement and expansion, and robust staff capacity remains critical to integrating career-connected learning opportunities into the Early College experience. In some cases, Early College staff also oversee career pathway programs like Innovation Career Pathways, promoting integration, and in other cases, they partner closely with a separate career pathways team. Either way, having dedicated staff ensures sufficient bandwidth to manage the many core components of career-connected Early College, especially building workforce partnerships and providing high-touch student advising.

- **Employer buy-in:** Many employers have limited capacity for delivering career-connected learning experiences to high school students, especially internships that may require a high degree of scaffolding and support. For Early College partnerships, employer engagement must be proactive but also mindful of employers' bandwidth. It can be helpful to offer employers a menu of engagement options, as the Dearborn STEM Academy does, enabling them to support student learning to varying degrees, from offering internships to designing school-based industry experiences to hosting "lunch and learn" sessions. Even low-commitment options on such a menu are valuable—they seed relationships with employers that could grow into higher-commitment offerings over time.

ENABLING CONDITION

Time

- **Strategic scheduling:** Given that career-connected Early College programs feature a range of experiences—e.g., college courses, career-connected learning, advising, support sessions—fitting them all into a school week requires creative solutions and close collaboration with higher education partners. The partnerships profiled in this report adopted a range of scheduling approaches, often leveraging the college course "off days" to fit in advising, support sessions, internships, and capstone projects.
- **High school programs of study that support Early College depth:** For Early College coursework to be career-connected, students need the ability to move beyond general education courses to major- and industry-aligned courses. The design of the high school's overall program of study can accommodate this. Some partnerships offer accelerated learning opportunities in early high school or even middle school to prepare students for sizeable Early College courseloads in grade 10 or 11, and many ensure that students' general education Early College courses count toward high school graduation requirements and thereby free up time for more advanced Early College coursework. Of course, in the latter case, students should be given adequate support to minimize the risk that they fail a course that is required for graduation.
- **Early student awareness of college and career pathways:** For students to make informed decisions about their high school learning experiences and future pathways, they should explore college and career pathways early and at the same time. For instance, the Dearborn STEM Academy embeds exploratory experiences aligned with its three STEM-themed Innovation Career Pathways into middle school coursework at the same time that students are exposed to Early College through the school's DECK program; Gardner High School offers a comprehensive college and career exploratory course for students in grade 9. In some cases, students are exposed to career pathway programs like Innovation Career Pathways in grade 9 and Early College in grade 10, creating the possibility that students could commit to a career pathway before learning about Early College and, as a result, not adequately consider the latter. To mitigate this risk, some partnerships are working to move college exploratory experiences earlier to align with career exploratory experiences.

Operations

- **Sufficient seats in college and career pathway programs:** When availability is limited in programs like Early College and Innovation Career Pathways, it can prevent students from participating in multiple pathways—and in some of the partnerships profiled, dual participation was an effective strategy for integrating college and career readiness. Within a given program, limited seats may also prevent students from focusing on their preferred career path, meaning their learning experiences may not completely align with their interests. Expanding seat counts makes it possible for more students to engage in meaningful postsecondary exploration and preparation.
- **Funding for career-connected learning experiences:** The profiled partnerships often cited funding challenges as a constraint for delivering career-connected learning, especially internships. Current financing strategies are often piecemeal, braiding Early College Support Grants, Connecting Activities grants, YouthWorks funding, federal funding through the Perkins Career and Technical Education Act, and other sources, with funds sometimes used to offer stipends for student internships and co-ops. More sustainable resources may support enhanced investment in these valuable experiences. Further, some partnerships struggle to finance Early College courses that provide students with industry-recognized certifications but few or no college credits, as such courses do not qualify for state reimbursement. Further research will be needed to examine how local, state, and federal funding sources can best support career-connected learning opportunities for Early College students.



Conclusion

Career-connected Early College approaches have the potential to deliver on the full promise of Massachusetts' Early College initiative, integrating college and career preparation to nurture students' personal development and open doors to their future success. Many Early College partnerships across Massachusetts, leaning into the "college for career" ethos, are working diligently to blend college and career experiences, and their work is worth celebrating and supporting. Their approaches reveal invaluable lessons for program design as well as challenges and questions that are critical for the field to address. The findings in this report—core components of career-connected Early College approaches, key considerations for program design, and enabling conditions for effective implementation—seek to advance conversation among practitioners, education leaders, and policymakers about ways to further expand such models through proper guidance and resources. In doing so, Massachusetts can continue its leadership in preparing students not only for family-sustaining careers, but also for futures of limitless possibility, in which students actively achieve success, prosperity, and purpose.

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ABOUT THE RENNIE CENTER

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ABOUT MA4EC

The Massachusetts Alliance for Early College (MA4EC) is a coalition of more than 100 school districts, higher education institutions, community-based organizations, philanthropists, and businesses working to break down barriers to college and career success for all students - particularly those who have been historically underserved and underrepresented - by supporting the growth of, and creating conditions for, high-quality, high-impact Early College programs across Massachusetts.

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