

## **Early College Policies and Participation at Maine High Schools**

March 2011

*This month, the Mitchell Institute surveyed Maine's 129 public high schools about early college policies. Early college is also sometimes referred to as "dual enrollment" or "dual credit." For the purposes of this survey, credit-bearing college courses students take in-person or online at public and private two-year and four-year colleges count as early college. High school principals and guidance counselors were invited via e-mail to respond to the online survey, and 108 schools (84%) responded. We conducted similar surveys in 2009 and 2006.*

### **Key Findings**

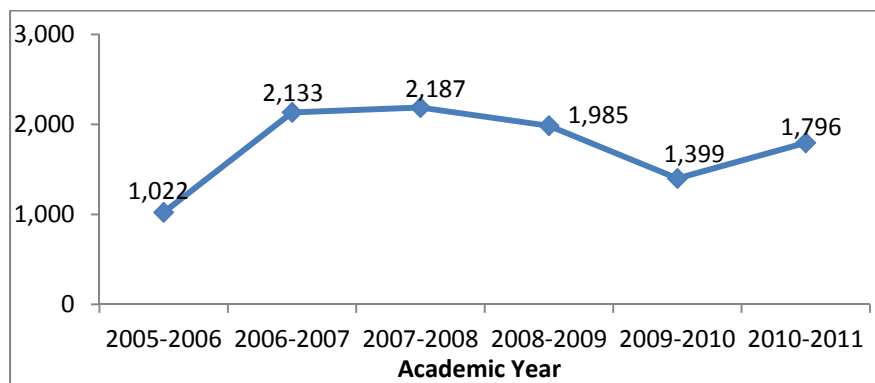
- This academic year, Maine high school students are taking an estimated 1,796 early college courses. Early college course-taking has declined by about one-fifth (18%) from the 2007-2008 peak of 2,187 courses, but has seen a net increase of about 75% since 2005-2006.
- At most Maine high schools, students have opportunities to take early college courses both on a college campus and online. The proportion of schools offering early college courses on-site at the high school or career and technical education center declined from 47% in 2009 to 36% in 2011.
- Two in three responding schools (67%) report that students pay part of the early college expenses. The proportion of schools using school budget funds for early college declined from 42% in 2009 to 33% in 2011, and the proportion using grant funds dropped from 42% to 25%.
- From the high schools' perspective, the most prevalent barriers to offering early college opportunities are distance/transportation, scheduling issues, and funding. Relatively few respondents indicate that postsecondary or secondary school policies present a barrier.
- The vast majority of responding schools indicate that the primary benefits to students who take early college courses are: low- or no-cost opportunity to earn college credit; opportunity to demonstrate college readiness; builds self-confidence; academic rigor of college courses; and improving the transition to college.
- The most prevalent suggested policy changes to improve access to early college courses include: more funding; offering more online/distance early college course options; offering early college courses on-site at the high school; streamlining eligibility policies across higher education institutions; coordinating postsecondary and secondary schedules; and allowing college courses to fulfill high school course requirements and/or to count toward graduation.

## Early College Participation

Survey respondents estimate that their schools students' will take a total of **1,796 early college courses during the 2010-2011** academic year and that they took 1,370 courses in 2009-2010. The estimate for 2009-2010 is very close to Maine Department of Education figures indicating that the state supported 1,399 early college courses that year through the Aspirations initiative.

Comparing these figures with earlier estimates from Maine Department of Education data, the chart below depicts early college course-taking statewide over the past six academic years. Early college course-taking has declined by about one-fifth (18%) from the 2007-2008 peak of 2,187 courses, but has seen a net increase of about 75% since 2005-2006.

**Maine Public High School Students' Early College Course-Taking**



## Credit for Early College Courses

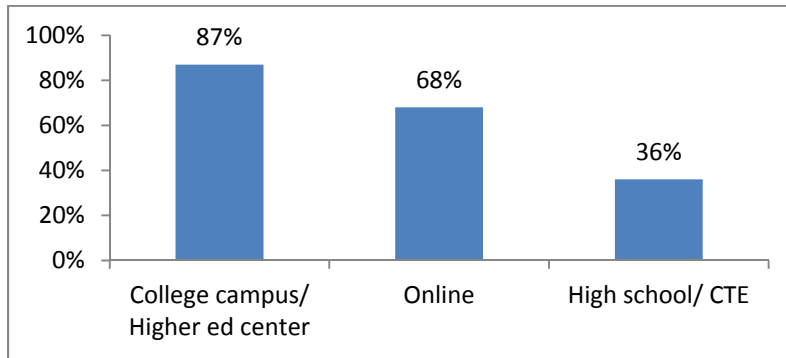
95% of responding schools (103 of 108) report that their school allows students to take college courses for both high school and college credit. Three of the five schools that do not offer dual credit allow students to take college courses without earning credit, and two of the five indicate that they expect to begin offering dual credit for college courses next year.

## Course Location

At most Maine high schools, students have opportunities to take early college courses both on a college campus and online or via distance learning technology.

- Students at 87% of responding schools can take courses at a **college campus** or higher education center.
- 68% of schools have **online/distance learning** early college course as an option.
- 36% of responding schools—down from 47% in 2009—offer early college courses **at the high school** or career and technical education center (CTE).

### Proportion of Responding Schools Offering Early College Courses at:

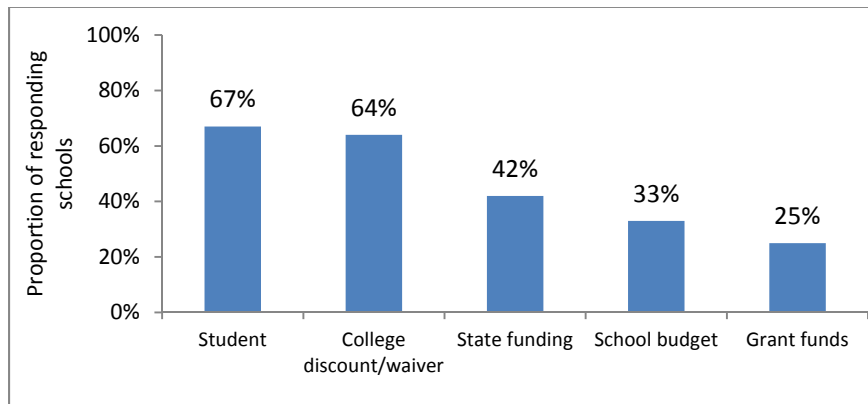


A minority of high schools (38%) report that they have teachers who also teach credit-bearing college courses (not including Advanced Placement courses).

### Funding

The most prevalent source of funding for early college tuition, fees, and book expenses are the students who take the courses; two in three responding schools (67%) report that **students pay** part of the early college expenses. **Discounts or waivers from postsecondary institutions** are nearly as prevalent (64%). More than two in five responding schools (42%) use **state funding** for early college, one-third (33%) have **school budget funds** for early college, and one in four schools (25%) use **grant funds** to support the costs of early college.

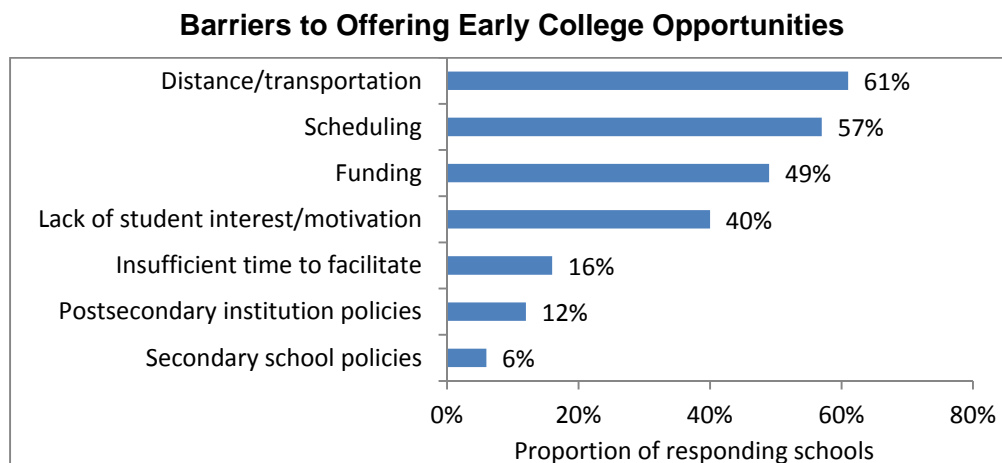
### Early College Funding Sources



Both school budget and grant funds for early college have become less prevalent since 2009. The proportions of schools using the three most common funding sources are strikingly similar to those found in our 2009 survey. However, the proportion of schools using **school budget funds for early college declined** from 42% in 2009 to 33% in 2011, and the proportion using **grant funds dropped** from 42% to 25%.

## Barriers

Presented with a list of possible barriers to offering early college opportunities, responding schools were most likely to indicate that **distance/transportation** is a barrier (61%), followed by **scheduling** (57%), and **funding** (49%). Relatively few respondents indicate that **postsecondary or secondary school policies** present a barrier—12% and 6% respectively.



The proportions of respondents reporting the barriers listed in the survey were very close to the findings from our 2009 survey, with the exception of **secondary school policies**. The proportion of respondents indicating that their school has **policies that present a barrier to early college dropped by about half**, from 13% in 2009 to 6% in 2011.

Several respondents offered comments that elaborate on the barriers to providing early college opportunities:

- “All school budgets are tight and the grant that we used for paying registration fees for early college courses has run out. This year we had to ask students to pay the registration fees (roughly \$100) and our enrollment has been cut in half or less.”
- “Funding has been the biggest obstacle for our students. The only students who can take an early college course now are students who are academically strong who more than likely will go on to college. Without [foundation grant] money we no longer can pay for courses.”
- “It is hard to figure out the policies and options for each college, since they are each different and often changing (e.g., USM, CMCC, and Kaplan all are changing for next year).”
- “It is really very readily available to interested students - main problem is transportation and conflict with after school activities.”
- “The biggest challenge for these classes for our students is an internal one. Our daily schedule is an alternating schedule that makes scheduling any outside classes extremely difficult.”
- “[Town] is very rural, so even attending the satellite site can be difficult. Within the school, internet access is OK, but many homes lack access...”

## Benefits

The survey asked respondents what they see as the primary benefits to students who take early college courses. The primary benefits chosen by most respondents are:

- 92%: Low- or no-cost **opportunity to earn college credit**
- 85%: Opportunity to **demonstrate college readiness**
- 84%: Builds **self-confidence**
- 83%: **Academic rigor** of college courses
- 81%: Improves **transition to college/persistence** in college

Comments on the benefits to students of early college include:

- “Success at a college class is priceless.”
- “This has been one of [our] most successful programs in increasing our graduation rate and students continuing on to college.”
- “We feel strongly that students who take early college courses are more prepared for college. Because we are such a small school, it is wonderful to have more choices for students.”

## Policy Change Suggestions

About one-quarter of respondents indicate that policy changes would improve access to early college courses at their school. The most prevalent suggested changes include:

- More **funding**
- Offering **more online early college course options** and offering college **courses on-site at the high school**
- **Streamlining eligibility policies** across higher education institutions
- Coordinating postsecondary and secondary **schedules**
- Allowing college courses **to fulfill high school course requirements** and/or to count toward graduation

### Funding

- “District paying for college fees & books”
- “Funding for summer courses”
- “Funding for tuition from the state would allow more students to participate in early college classes.”
- “If we had more money, we could do MUCH more - hire another counselor so our caseloads were more conducive to speaking individually about these opportunities with more students; hire a university instructor part-time to bring a class or two right here to campus.”
- “Keep and increase early college options for students. Continue funding them so high school students do not have to pay for tuition...fees should be waived too. They are almost \$100 for a community college course.”
- “Stipend for high school coordinator, particularly as more colleges are added, all with separate processes/criteria.”

### Course Issues

- “If we were allowed to offer [college courses] on our high school campus. Due to changes in postsecondary school policies, we are no longer able to do this.”
- “More online opportunities. Many students play sports, participate in clubs and work. The schedule does not always work out to accommodate these students, but if they could do it

online they could work it out. Academ-e works well through UMaine. If Aspirations could be done online, that would be great.”

- “Over the past few years the majority of our students who have taken college courses have done so through Aspirations. This limits students to 100-level courses as space is available. Since [early college students] are on a tuition waiver, paying students are given the spaces first. This makes it difficult for our students to take desired courses.”

#### Postsecondary Institution Policies

- “It would be helpful if our University System and Community College System would agree on access requirements. Either have a common Accuplacer score required or let high school staff be responsible for determining appropriate candidates. My high school [works with more than] one postsecondary institution, and keeping track of multiple eligibility requirements is difficult.”
- “Offer training/education leading to approval for eligible secondary school teachers to offer college courses for credit to their students.”
- “Our school policies are very conducive to Early College, but *Early College for ME* seems to be the only program open to taking a chance on the non-honor-roll students on a regular basis.”
- “Some colleges have begun to set restrictions as to which high school students can take a course. For example, one college does not allow first semester juniors or second semester seniors to take a course. Other colleges have begun to set qualifiers that are screening out average students, such as minimum PSAT scores or GPAs. In some cases, the number of slots for high school students has been reduced.”

#### Scheduling

- “Changing the high school schedule to better match the postsecondary institution schedule.”
- “More coordination of schedules would be tremendously helpful.”
- “Offer general education classes in the evening, when students could attend.”

#### High School Policies

- “Receiving academic credit for a required class (presently students get only elective credit)”
- “Reduce the number of [high school] credits students need to carry (generally 6), and make the senior year courses more practical, less filler.”

### Technical Assistance

About two in five respondents (37%) described technical assistance that would improve access to early college courses at their school. Several ideas were mentioned by multiple respondents, including access to more or better **technology**, and help **compiling information on postsecondary institutions’ policies and offerings**. Many respondents praised the assistance they already receive from the Maine Community College System’s *Early College for ME* and University of Maine’s *Academ-e*.

Specific suggestions for technical assistance include:

- “I research and compile the different information--options/process/contact info--for 5 or 6 [colleges] and mail it home to all juniors. Would be nice if colleges sent a memo annually to us with that information so I don't have to do this research.”
- “Increased use of teleconferencing devices (polycom, tandberg, etc.) during the school day to decrease travel time. Students could then incorporate [college] courses into the school day without having to leave the school building.”
- “It would be good if all seniors could have a laptop.”
- “Sadly we have lost ITV and compressed video abilities due to funding. This would be an asset to have and be able to offer students class opportunities on our site.”
- “The biggest problem is the cost of software for computer/technical courses. The postsecondary schools require us to use the same software that is updated yearly and there is no way we can budget for those cost or afford new software every year.”
- “On a larger scale, I would love to see a day when college and high school faculty meet on a semi-annual basis to exchange information, content, strategies, etc. There is still a huge gap (preparation, understanding, communication, etc.) between high school and college personnel.”

## Conclusion

Early college has demonstrated persistence in Maine since the expansion that began in 2006, even in the face of declining resources as the grants supporting that expansion have ended. Early college helps high school students earn low- or no-cost college credits. These opportunities are particularly valuable for students who face barriers to college or are not thriving in high school, providing a chance to demonstrate—perhaps most importantly to themselves—their level of college readiness. In many cases, taking an early college course builds interest in pursuing a college degree.

This survey’s finding that fewer schools have grant and school budget funds available to support early college costs raises concern. Many of the students who can least afford to pay early college tuition, fees and book expenses—e.g., those from lower-income families, potential first generation college students—are the same students for whom early college opportunities are most likely to “make a difference” in terms of academic engagement, college matriculation and success.