



ACCELERATING
COLLEGE READINESS
LESSONS FROM NORTH CAROLINA'S
INNOVATOR EARLY COLLEGES

By Cecilia Le and Jill Frankfort



JOBS FOR THE FUTURE



**EARLY COLLEGE
HIGH SCHOOL
INITIATIVE**

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Cover: A Davidson County Early College student works independently on her school-issued laptop. Teachers have transformed instruction at Davidson, using the computers to model the use of technology in college courses and provide academic support to students at nontraditional hours. Photograph courtesy of Christy Sarver Wolf, Davidson County Early College

ABOUT JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

Jobs for the Future develops, implements, and promotes new education and workforce strategies that help communities, states, and the nation compete in a global economy. In 200 communities in 41 states, JFF improves the pathways leading from high school to college to family-sustaining careers. JFF manages the Early College High School Initiative.

ABOUT THE EARLY COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOL INITIATIVE

Early college high school is a bold approach, based on the principle that academic rigor, combined with the opportunity to save time and money, is a powerful motivator for students to work hard and meet serious intellectual challenges. Early college high schools blend high school and college in a rigorous yet supportive program, compressing the time it takes to complete a high school diploma and the first two years of college.

Since 2002, the partner organizations of the Early College High School Initiative have started or redesigned more than 200 schools in 24 states and the District of Columbia. The schools are designed so that low-income youth, first-generation college goers, English language learners, students of color, and other young people underrepresented in higher education can simultaneously earn a high school diploma and an Associate's degree or up to two years of credit toward a Bachelor's degree—tuition free.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
The Innovator Schools	3
POWERFUL PRACTICES	6
Each staff member embraces responsibility for preparing every student for college success	6
Teachers use a consistent set of instructional strategies proven to accelerate learning	9
Students receive intensive and individualized supports to overcome academic barriers	11
Students are coached to take full ownership of their learning over time	14
Staff collaboration extends beyond institutional borders	17
THE PATH TO COLLEGE—FOR ALL	20

INTRODUCTION

At Buncombe County Early College, the history teacher attends his students' college history course, then holds a support class to help his teens interpret the college textbook and create study outlines. Students at Davidson County Early College develop a four-year graduation project whose academic complexity builds over their time at the school. Starting as ninth graders, Anson County Early College students lead conferences to discuss their academic strengths, weaknesses, and progress in front of an audience of teachers and parents. These are among the innovative and powerful ways that early colleges in North Carolina are leading the way in scaffolding all students to college readiness.

Early college high schools take an ambitious approach to preparing young people underrepresented in higher education for college. Rather than presume that students of color, students from low-income families, English language learners, and first-generation college goers will struggle with college work, they assume that all students can succeed. Early colleges, all of which are public schools partnering with a postsecondary institution, enable students to simultaneously earn a high school diploma and work toward a college degree, tuition free. Early college students participate in an accelerated program of blended high school and college coursework coupled with academic and social supports.

More than 200 early college high schools serving 50,000 students have opened across the United States since 2002—and they are achieving results. Eighty-six percent of early college graduates enroll in college immediately after high school, compared with two-thirds of high school graduates nationwide. Of the 3,000 early college graduates in 2009, a quarter had earned two full years of college credit or an Associate's degree.¹

Half of all states have at least one early college, but North Carolina leads the nation with 71 early colleges, each located on the campus of a partnering higher education institution. In 2004, North Carolina launched a statewide early college initiative as a strategy for preparing students for the education needed in a post-manufacturing knowledge economy. Students typically graduate in four or five years, earning up to two years of college credit and compressing the time to a postsecondary degree. With the support of the North Carolina New Schools Project, a public-private organization that develops innovative high schools, North Carolina now has the most early colleges of any state and substantial data about what works.²

In 2010, the North Carolina New Schools Project named five early colleges as "Innovators"—based on their highly effective strategies to prepare all students for postsecondary education. Three of the Innovators, Anson County Early College, Buncombe County Early College, and Davidson County Early College, are among the state's first early colleges and offer five years of lessons in preparing high school students for college rigor. The other two Innovator schools, Vance County Early College and Warren Early College, opened in the 2008 school year and offer emerging examples of practices that accelerate the academic progress of all students.

¹ Sources: the Early College High School Initiative Student Information System, which captures evidence of student progress in early college high schools throughout the United States, and the National Center for Education Statistics.

² Research from the SERVE Center at UNC-Greensboro has found that early colleges are closing the achievement gap for students of color and that their students report more rigorous and relevant instruction than a comparison group.

In spring 2010, the North Carolina New Schools Project invited these five schools to share their practices at the Best Practices Institute, a conference designed to help spread highly effective practices among North Carolina early colleges. *Accelerating College Readiness* incorporates and expands on the strategies and lessons shared there, with specific examples of how these college readiness approaches are implemented in the schools on a daily basis.

It is not easy to create a good early college—one that takes young people, often academically behind, and gives them the various types of support they need to meet the challenge of college coursework. But North Carolina’s experience with establishing dozens of these innovative schools demonstrates that it is possible—and on a large scale.

NORTH CAROLINA NEW SCHOOLS PROJECT: DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR HIGH SCHOOL INNOVATION PROJECTS

1. Ready for College
2. Powerful Teaching and Learning
3. Personalization
4. Redefine Professionalism
5. Purposeful Design

To read more about the design principles for high school innovation projects developed by the North Carolina New Schools Project, see: <http://newschoolsproject.org/uploads/resources/educator-resource-design-principles-with-indicators-and-evidence.pdf>.

The North Carolina New Schools Project has developed five design principles to guide the development of innovative high schools that promote more effective teaching and learning (see box). The commonality among the five Innovator schools is that each embodies these design principles, putting them in operation every day to accelerate student learning. A visitor to any of the Innovator schools would observe the New Schools Project principles at work as:

- > Each staff member embraces responsibility for preparing every student for college success.
- > Teachers use a consistent set of instructional strategies proven to accelerate learning.
- > Students receive intensive and individualized supports to overcome academic barriers.
- > Students are coached to take full ownership of their learning over time.
- > Staff collaboration extends beyond institutional borders.

These practices are not independent but mutually reinforce one another. They act as the core foundation for a systemic and intentional set of practices geared toward college readiness and success for all. Together, they add up to powerful results. To help make these approaches replicable elsewhere, *Accelerating College Readiness* shares concrete strategies and lessons learned from these early colleges—lessons that educators in all types of high schools can implement. These are not the only good practices; rather, they illustrate some of the best practices, all emanating from a state committed to education reform.

THE INNOVATOR SCHOOLS



A Buncombe County Early College student completes her coursework. Buncombe structures the school day so teachers can collaborate with one another as well as support students in precollege and college coursework.

Anson County Early College, in rural North Carolina southeast of Charlotte, expresses its motto “Each One Teach One” through numerous programs to encourage formal peer tutoring and student ownership of their learning. To expose students to family-sustaining careers and emphasize work readiness skills, Anson emphasizes job shadowing and internship opportunities for students, all of whom complete significant volunteer and work hours at elementary schools, doctors’ and veterinary offices, government and civic organizations, and other businesses. Out of the early college’s 32 graduates in 2010, more than 80 percent earned a year or more of transferable college credit along with their high school diploma.

Buncombe County Early College, located in Asheville and serving Buncombe County students, expects that two-thirds of students graduating in spring 2011 will also receive an Associate’s degree at the same time. Buncombe’s teachers, who follow a yearlong block schedule, have built unusual flexibility into the school day so they can collaborate with one another and support students in college coursework. Working closely with



the school's postsecondary partner, Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College, the high school teachers collaborate with college professors and, in some cases, attend their students' college courses.

Davidson County Early College serves the county school system, as well as the school districts of Lexington and Thomasville. Strong relationships between students and staff are apparent in every aspect of the school. The staff has created a culture of 24/7 support: students often get help from teachers on weekends and evenings through their school-issued laptop computers. These relationships are reflected in more personal ways as well: it's not unusual for a student to bring coffee and baked goods to a teacher or vice versa. Because of the students' consistently high achievement and gains in learning, North Carolina has recognized Davidson as both a high-growth school and an honor school of excellence—the state's highest designation.

Vance County and **Warren Early College High Schools** are the newest of the Innovator schools, with their oldest students in their junior year and just now transitioning into intensive college coursework. Both schools are located in the northeastern corner of the state on a campus of Vance-Granville Community College. Both use data vigilantly to customize supports for students. And both have had success accelerating their students' acquisition of essential skills. For example, nearly two-thirds of Warren students arrived reading below grade level, but 92 percent passed the English end-of-course exam by the end of the ninth-grade year. Vance and Warren are emerging examples of how start-up schools can build a foundation for success.

An Anson County Early College student reads with children from a nearby elementary school as part of his community service, a major component of the program for all Anson early college students.

NORTH CAROLINA'S INNOVATOR EARLY COLLEGES

	Location	Year Opened	Principal	College Partner	Enrollment	Percent First-Generation College Students
Anson County Early College	Polkton	2005	Deborah Davis	South Piedmont Community College	183	82%
Buncombe County Early College	Asheville	2005	Meg Turner	Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College	246	55%
Davidson County Early College	Thomasville	2004	Larry Allred	Davidson County Community College	112	87%
Vance County Early College High School	Henderson	2008	Michael Bullard	Vance-Granville Community College	177	94%
Warren Early College High School	Warrenton	2008	Danylu Hundley (2008-10) Laurie Baker (2010-present)	Vance-Granville Community College	101	73%

POWERFUL PRACTICES



Davidson County Early College students collaborate on their science coursework.

EACH STAFF MEMBER EMBRACES RESPONSIBILITY FOR PREPARING EVERY STUDENT FOR COLLEGE SUCCESS.

“We set out to prove that regardless of a child’s economic, academic, social, or emotional background, with the right culture and staff, all kids could be successful.”

–Anson Principal Deborah Davis

All five Innovator schools share a common mission: to prepare every student for college readiness and success. The idea is not just a feel-good slogan but a well-defined commitment from each staff member. Regardless of students’ previous academic performance or knowledge of college, the Innovators treat them all as aspiring college graduates. Instead of presuming that unprepared students cannot learn challenging material, teachers provide the supports needed to help them succeed in rigorous coursework.



Buncombe County Early College students taking a chemistry class for college credit work with their professor, Otho Hoyte, who teaches at Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College.

Develop caring relationships between students and staff that provide the basis for high academic expectations.

Central to each school's commitment to college for all are the personal relationships that staff and students develop. Each of the Innovator schools has created regular, built-in opportunities for adults and young people to connect, both inside and outside of school. These relationships provide the basis for unyielding expectations for high academic achievement. At all five schools, staff members are close to students, and they are familiar with the academic strengths and weaknesses of each student as well as their personal histories and interests. They also regularly push students to work harder and aim higher, using the foundation of respect and caring between them to demand a high level of academic intensity. "Relationships are number one on our list," explained Patty Salmons, Davidson's curriculum director and Algebra 1 teacher. "Once [students] come here, they're family."

One day in September, Davidson Principal Larry Allred shuffled through a sheaf of papers showing interim grades in college courses for each of his students. He had spent the weekend writing personal notes to each family to accompany the progress reports, complimenting students on high marks or pointing out where they could improve. Allred's intense commitment to each student's success seeps through every conversation. He is unable to talk about his students without detailing individual stories of their successes, the challenges they overcame, and the postsecondary pursuits the graduates have undertaken.

When hiring new teachers in Anson's second year, Principal Deborah Davis listened for candidates who used words like "nurturing" and "caring" to describe their approaches to teaching. She also sought a recognition that students learn in many different ways and need a range of academic, social, and emotional supports to succeed. Anson organizes every student in the school into CARE (Children Are Really Exceptional) groups of about eight students who meet with a teacher once a month inside or outside of school. Teachers have hosted students at their homes, gone bowling or to the movies, attended student sporting events, or led other recreational activities to develop rapport. "The relationship piece is the yardstick by which I measure everything I do," Davis said. "I firmly believe if you touch the heart, you can reach the mind."

Buncombe organizes students into "houses," small, multigrade groups of students led by one "house teacher" who guides them through their five years at the school. The summer before students enter Buncombe, house teachers visit each of their students and families at home. The teacher outlines school expectations, asks the student to reflect on his or her academic strengths and weaknesses, and tells



All Anson County Early College students enroll in rigorous college prep courses.

parents how they can support their children, such as by keeping track of their progress in school by checking grades on line. In their first and second years at Buncombe, students attend a daily “house class” that typically provides a break from academics and fosters a sense of community. House classes involve an eclectic range of activities, from researching colleges, to playing kickball, to cultivating a small school garden of flowers and produce that benefits the needy. Students remain in the same teacher’s house each year, and if they encounter serious academic challenges, the house teacher is the one who intervenes.

Avoid tracking students to ensure that their academic history does not determine their future trajectory.

Like most early colleges, North Carolina’s Innovator schools serve students of a wide range of skill levels. Vance, one of the newer Innovator schools, initially tried to differentiate its English instruction by tracking students into classes by entering skill level. However, staff soon found that students in the lower-level class were not “getting the extra oomph” they could get from learning with higher-performing students, Principal Michael Bullard said. The school has eliminated tracking and now places all students in honors classes. Vance has found this approach effective in moving students with low skills to college-level work. About half of the first entering class at Vance scored at the lowest levels on state achievement tests, but by the end of the tenth grade, all but three students had passed the placement test to enter credit-bearing college courses.

Fay Agar, director of the state’s Early College High School Initiative, describes Bullard’s approach to his work at Vance this way: “When a student is not successful, he just sort of says to a teacher, ‘You’re not done yet—you haven’t finished trying everything.’ He is just committed to chipping away. The attention to the individual student and the ‘whatever it takes’ kind of attitude is what works there.” This attitude is paired with a comprehensive program of student supports provided by the school.

The other Innovator schools take a similar approach, placing all students in the same challenging courses coupled with intense academic support. Warren, for example, created extra elective classes to boost skills and teach reading and writing strategies. “We don’t do any remediation classes or water down the curriculum for students who have not been successful,” said former Principal Danylu Hundley, who retired in 2010. “The vision of early college is to give the supports. Too many times we lower students’ expectations of themselves by the courses we put them in, and I think doing that closes the door. All of our students go in these [college prep] classes.”

TEACHERS USE A CONSISTENT SET OF INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES PROVEN TO ACCELERATE LEARNING.

“Students are to be at the center of the learning, not teachers.”

—Buncombe Principal Meg Turner

To start taking college courses and earn credit for them while still in high school, early college students must become “college ready” long before they earn a high school diploma. All of North Carolina’s early colleges use a common instructional framework that gives students of all skill levels tools to access and analyze complex information (see box). The framework was developed by Jobs for the Future and the University Park Campus School in Worcester, Massachusetts, a nationally recognized high school in an economically disadvantaged urban area. It is aimed at helping underrepresented youth to accelerate their learning with instructional strategies that include high-level academic writing, talking, and questioning during class, as well as collaborative group work that enables students of diverse skill levels to support and challenge one another.

THE COMMON INSTRUCTIONAL FRAMEWORK: SIX STRATEGIES TO ACCELERATE LEARNING

North Carolina’s early colleges use a powerful set of instructional strategies to give students of all skill levels the tools to access and analyze complex information. Through their emphasis on active student participation, these six strategies require students to take ownership of the learning process.

- > **Collaborative Group Work** creates an engaging classroom culture in which students with diverse skill levels are supported and challenged by their peers. Students are grouped intentionally and each student is accountable for her or his contribution.
- > **Writing to Learn** helps students, including English language learners, develop their ideas, critical thinking, and fluency of expression in all subjects. Students experiment with written language in every class every day.
- > **Literacy Groups** help build comprehension, fluency, and higher-level discourse across a variety of texts in different disciplines by assigning each student a role to play and structured guidelines for participation.
- > **Questioning** challenges students and teachers to use deep, probing questions to foster purposeful conversations and stimulate intellectual inquiry.
- > **Classroom Talk** encourages all students to develop their thinking, listening, and speaking skills, and promotes active learning. Classroom talk takes place in pairs, in group work, and as a whole class.
- > **Scaffolding** encompasses a broad range of techniques such as pre-reading activities and graphic organizers that help students connect prior knowledge—from an earlier grade, different content area, or personal experience—to challenging new concepts.

This instructional framework is at the core of the professional development offered by Jobs for the Future’s UPCS Institute for Student Success, a partnership with the University Park Campus School. For more information, see www.jff.org.



Create a culture of collaborative learning, making each student accountable for the learning of the group.

At the beginning of the 2010 school year, Cate Gentry's ninth-grade English students at Davidson Early College told her they had never been assigned to read a novel on their own before. In previous English classes, many of them had read only short passages, not full novels, and they read aloud together in class. So she was apprehensive about assigning *Of Mice and Men*, despite its relative brevity at just over 100 pages.

To tackle Steinbeck's classic in school, Gentry assigned students to literacy groups, a strategy to facilitate the analysis of complex texts. In individual roles as "question corrector," "vocabulary master," "prober," and "summarizer"—roles designed to hold each student partially accountable for the learning of the group—students discussed how various characters were alienated from the mainstream, as well as the ways in which Steinbeck used foreshadowing. Gentry moved from table to table as facilitator, but students generally carried these discussions on their own.

By late September, when the class was expected to have read only through chapter 5, half of Gentry's students had finished the book. "And the other day, one of them said to me, 'Ms. Gentry, I had an epiphany last night,'" Gentry recalled, explaining that the student had realized the way a dog in the story was treated was meant to symbolize treatment of the intellectually impaired main character. "I said, 'My job is done.' "

A major strength at Buncombe Early College is an emphasis on group work across all subjects. "It's a schoolwide expectation for us," said math teacher Stefanie Buckner. "Our kids do it in every class every day and they know what's expected of them." In her math classroom, teams of four students work together to convert word problems into equations. A bucket used during group work contains shovels of different colors that symbolize each person's responsibility for a portion of the workload. Each shovel is associated with a rotating group role, such as looking for key words and concepts.

Push students to take intellectual risks, challenging their own thinking and that of their peers.

In Ruth Powers's chemistry class at Davidson Early College, student groups reported on their lab tests of the electrical conductivity of various substances. When several groups could not agree on whether sugar was conductive, Powers used the instructional strategy of questioning to guide them through a discussion of why results could

Vance County Early College High School students work in pairs. Collaborative group work is a major instructional strategy at North Carolina early colleges. Students support and challenge one another when tackling rigorous material.

have varied, leading them to consider the cleanliness of their equipment and the precision of their testing. The students with different results from the rest of the class then repeated the test in front of the class; they concluded that their sugar sample might have been contaminated with another substance.

Powers and other teachers said they often gear instruction toward encouraging students to feel comfortable constructing original arguments and taking intellectual risks. “I talk to them about how [19th-century scientist John] Dalton said the atom was indivisible. It turned out he was wrong, but that didn’t stop him from putting forth his theory,” Powers said. “If he hadn’t said what he thought, we wouldn’t have been able to build on that and refine it and get to where we are today.”

Integrate daily writing exercises into each classroom to help students develop their ideas and fluency of expression.

The use of frequent and low-stakes writing assignments is a key aspect of the instructional model used by the Innovator schools. Students clarify their ideas not just in humanities classes but in every classroom. At Buncombe, each of Buckner’s math classes keeps a group journal that absent students are expected to review: Students write “Dear Absent” and “Dear Confused” letters not only to help classmates but also to clarify their own thinking. Each student creates a toolkit about how to approach math problems. This toolkit grows over time, and students rely on it in future math classes, including their college courses.

At the end of each class period, students complete a short “exit ticket” exercise that challenges them to articulate what they learned that day (and that tells their teacher which students still do not understand a topic). On one day, Buckner asked students to explain how to solve a system of equations. Many of the students embellished their responses with examples and became so engrossed in the activity that Buckner had to shoo some out of the classroom after the bell rang.

STUDENTS RECEIVE INTENSIVE AND INDIVIDUALIZED SUPPORTS TO OVERCOME ACADEMIC BARRIERS.

*“They go to every extent to help us here, getting us tutoring or whatever we need.”
—Sumaiya Nazli, Davidson tenth-grade student*

Early college students complete high school and up to two years of college in a compressed amount of time. The early college program supports them through what effectively becomes their first two years of college—an especially vulnerable education period for students from low-income families. Within that compressed time span, school staff must accelerate student learning while providing enough academic supports to enable the students to handle college coursework. Mechanisms for facilitating intensive and individualized support include the deliberate transformation of the typical school schedule and the strategic use of data to target student weaknesses.

Formally structure time in daily and weekly schedules so all students can get the individualized supports they need.

All of the Innovator schools have developed flexible schedules to accommodate each student's instructional needs. For example, some Anson students take double periods of math or English, depending on their areas of weakness. Davidson delays the start of high school courses until 11 a.m. so that students who need additional help in reading comprehension or math can take an extra period in the morning. With this deliberate and flexible scheduling, teachers are available during that morning period to provide students with support.

To help students succeed in college English, Anson has students double up on English courses in the senior year. Each takes British literature at Anson for an extra dose of literacy, along with college English at South Piedmont Community College. The school decided on this novel arrangement because seniors were struggling when taking college English alone. Similarly, after Vance faculty realized that students needed more explicit literacy instruction than they were getting through other classes, they created a school-wide literacy seminar to give students more practice with reading engaging and topical material and constructing written responses.

At Buncombe, staff found that scheduling extra support periods deliberately around students' specific needs in their college classes is worth the logistical headaches. "Before, college support just happened where we could find open blocks in their schedule," guidance counselor Karen Morgan said. "Now we've intentionally scheduled them into college support with a high school teacher if they're taking a college course in that content area."

Use data on student learning needs to target support efficiently.

Innovator schools constantly assess student progress and employ a variety of interventions to help students become college ready. At Warren, the principal keeps a color-coded matrix showing how close each student has come to passing the college placement test, a prerequisite to begin taking college courses for credit. In response to the data trends, Warren hired a reading instructor from Vance-Granville Community College to work with its students four days a week. Students who were very close to demonstrating that they were college ready but had not yet passed the placement test could enter college English courses coupled with intensive tutorial support after school and in the evenings.

Another key data-usage strategy is to collect and respond to early feedback on student progress in college courses. All three of the Innovator schools established in 2004 or earlier have developed early alert systems with their postsecondary partners: this informs them throughout the semester when students are having trouble—whether indicated by low grades, poor attendance, or missed assignments. The early college then puts action plans into place quickly. Supports span a broad range, from extra seminars, to parental intervention, to tutoring sessions with the college instructor.

SCHEDULING FOR SUCCESS

The following class schedules, from two students at two different early colleges, illustrate how early colleges might integrate high school courses, college courses, and academic support periods into the school day.

DAVIDSON YEAR 1 STUDENT	BUNCOMBE YEAR 3 STUDENT
<p>Fall semester</p> <p>9:00-11:00 Health and Physical Education (college course)</p> <p>11-12:20 English 1</p> <p>1:05-2:25 Civics</p> <p>2:30-3:30 Seminar</p> <p>Spring semester</p> <p>9:00-11:00 Public Speaking (college course)</p> <p>11-12:20 Algebra 1</p> <p>1:05-2:25 Earth Science</p> <p>2:30-3:30 Seminar</p>	<p>Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays</p> <p>8:30-10:00 Integrated Math 3</p> <p>10:00-11:30 Spanish 2</p> <p>12:40-2:00 English 3</p> <p>2:15-3:40 Earth and Environmental Science</p> <p>Tuesdays and Thursdays</p> <p>8:00-9:30 Psychology 150 (college course)</p> <p>9:30-9:55 College Support</p> <p>10:00-11:30 Spanish 2</p> <p>12:40-2:00 History 131 (college course)</p> <p>2:15-3:40 History Support</p>

Gradually increase student independence, while making sure that students are anchored to supports they can access easily.

Davidson Early College students receive academic support in a seminar that spans all four years at the school. In the ninth and tenth grades, it takes place face to face. However, by junior year, students can opt for an online version or an online-traditional hybrid, depending on how much independence they can handle. Students who are ready to work autonomously check in on line with their seminar teacher, while students who need more guidance attend a traditional class. Ninety percent of seniors take the seminar on line. "Seminar is a way of keeping students tied to high school supports as they do college classes," said Principal Larry Allred. "The kids need a nest. They want a significant relationship with an adult teacher, one grounded in pushing, unearthing, being accessible to the kids at nontraditional times."

Anson and Buncombe also take a "nest" approach with their upperclassmen. Anson seniors and fifth-year students return to the early college building to take a seminar even though the rest of their classes are all college courses held elsewhere on the campus. Without the seminar, school staff realized, they rarely saw their older students, who were disconnected from the supports they needed. Buncombe goes even further, scheduling students into at least one high school course during each of their five years at the early college.



Davidson County Early College students work together in a math classroom.

STUDENTS ARE COACHED TO TAKE FULL OWNERSHIP OF THEIR LEARNING OVER TIME.

“[Early college] gives you a lot of responsibility, a lot of freedom. You really do have to grow up faster than the average student. Nobody’s in the corner not listening.”

–Blue Michael, Davidson eleventh-grade student

To become college ready, students must master not only academic skills but also the habits and behaviors required for college success. These include taking initiative, managing time, working independently yet collaboratively, and knowing when and how to seek help. The Innovator early colleges take important steps to foster these behaviors and scaffold students to build awareness of themselves as learners.

Give students formal opportunities to reflect on themselves as learners and evaluate what they still must master to become college ready.

Student-led conferencing is a key approach to building student initiative. At Anson, each student reflects on his or her academic strengths, weaknesses, and progress in front of their parents and teachers. Students keep a portfolio of work samples to share with parents the day of the conference. After the presentations, parents and students respond in writing to reflective questions posed by the teacher. At Davidson, student-led conferences before the entire faculty help guide students in danger of academic failure to take responsibility for their situation and devise an action plan (see box, page 15). Buncombe is in the process of developing conferences in which students make group presentations on parent night, explaining course registration forms and their progress earning college credits.

Anson pushes seniors to reflect on the progress of their college work through a program called SKIP—Seniors Know Instructional Progress. Seniors report on their status in each college course to their SKIP teachers each week, a process that helps each student build awareness of academic problem areas and resources through which they can seek help.

Create a culture in which students are responsible for helping peers learn.

Students internalize the culture of the Innovator schools to the extent that they tutor their peers—formally or informally—and hold one another accountable for academic success. At Anson, students act as

“junior facilitators” in their areas of academic strength. When Principal Davis set a high benchmark for the year for student proficiency as measured by state tests, a group of students said the goal should be even higher. The students then created a banner for the school entryway challenging their peers to achieve 100 percent proficient in every subject tested.

In one Davidson classroom, the board displayed a long list of students, their phone numbers, and the subjects for which they had volunteered to be tutors. Principal Allred shows that he takes peer tutoring seriously: the service is listed as an intervention for many students in his spreadsheet of help for those struggling in college courses.

A STUDENT-LED CONFERENCE FROM DAVIDSON EARLY COLLEGE

The following excerpt from a presentation by a Davidson student in summer 2010 demonstrates how the early college asks students to reflect on their learning process and take responsibility for their academic success.

Today, I have been asked to appear before the faculty due to my recent grades. Last semester, I received two failing grades for calculus and Biology 112. I also received a C in public speaking. My attendance was above average last semester, so I know this isn't the problem. I had a formal conference with the math instructor about my test grade, which helped. Not all of my assignments were completed on time. In fact, many assignments were not fully completed. This is one major factor that would hinder my grades. And I now realize just how important homework is.

To improve my grades, I tried a few things. One thing was the regular calculus tutorials each day. Another was the biology tutorials in the mornings, and the ones in preparation for the [end-of-course exam]. I also tried doing better on my study habits. In fact, my study time did increase, but with one problem. I tried to study too much before the tests. Now I finally realize that studying needs to be done each day in order to memorize material for the tests. I still plan to increase my overall study time. This past semester, I put in roughly one hour of study time at home per test and an extra half-hour to an hour study time at school. I also learned that I need to take some things out of my life to make more time for school assignments and study time.

Motivation for school was nonexistent in the past. Now, it's real to me. I have motivation to do well in school because I have concluded that I want to transfer to a four-year college, specifically, Appalachian State.

As a result of the conference, this student developed an improvement plan that included the following:

- > Give up Facebook for the weekdays.
- > Put less importance on hanging out.
- > Put forth more effort in homework and study time.
- > Accept help.
- > Tell my parents about all of my schoolwork.



Students at Vance County Early College High School engage in group discussion.

“They don’t want to disappoint not only themselves but their teachers and their peers,” said Christy Sarver Wolf, technology facilitator at Davidson. “Another student was giving a lecture to one of his peers because he hadn’t done his homework: ‘You’re going to fall behind!’ It was a better lecture than I could have given.”

Develop projects with increasingly challenging aspects, providing the scaffolding students need to step up their learning over time.

Although many high schools require seniors to complete a graduation project, several of the Innovator schools use the project as a way to structure and support learning over a span of four or five years. In the freshman year, Davidson students choose a topic and make a proposal to the faculty. In successive years, they learn research methods and write position papers, complete with supporting references. As seniors, students present their project at a public forum. One young man who designed and constructed a classical guitar invited his music teacher, who then invited his college music class. The student gave a multimedia presentation on the history of guitar music, then strummed his compositions before an audience of students and faculty from both his high school and his college.

Similarly, each Anson student begins a graduation project in the ninth grade. It starts with a career exploration class and a portfolio that each student builds over the five years at the school. Students add reflections on their community service and job-shadowing experiences to the portfolio in grades 10 and 11. In the eleventh grade, they hone the focus of their projects, write research papers, and develop formal letters of intent connecting the papers to their senior projects. Seniors present their projects to a jury of professionals in a relevant field, who use a detailed scoring rubric to assess the project.

Teach students explicit skills for navigating college experiences.

Because most early college students aspire to be the first in their families to complete a college degree, they often experience particular difficulty navigating the norms, expectations, culture, and even language of academia. Because of this knowledge gap, Innovator schools put in place formal opportunities for students to “practice” seeking out and using college resources, such as through a requirement that students visit a professor during office hours at least once. Davidson teachers sometimes accompany students to visit their professors the first time to model how they should interact. The next time, teachers encourage students to go alone.

Several of the Innovator schools provide every student access to a laptop computer through a state grant, enabling teachers to model the use of technology in college courses. For example, many teachers require students to visit their course website to download homework



Buncombe County Early College students plant spring flowers in the school's garden as part of their earth and environmental science course. The small community garden also produces tomatoes, peppers, and other produce to benefit the needy.

assignments, much as instructors at the community college do. Cate Gentry at Davidson keeps a blog for her ninth-grade English class, posting questions about the books they read and requiring each student to respond and to further the discussion by commenting on their classmates' responses. Through this process, students become familiar with the online "bulletin board" discussion format that future college courses may require.

The early college liaison at Vance-Granville Community College teaches a "college skills for success" course for Vance early college students. Commonly offered to college freshmen, this course covers effective study habits, note taking, time management, and other issues. The liaison, a staff person at the college with responsibility for navigating the relationship between the two institutions, gets to know Vance students through teaching this course; the liaison can then coach them through thorny issues involving their college classes or professors.

STAFF COLLABORATION EXTENDS BEYOND INSTITUTIONAL BORDERS.

"There really is a shared culture here where teachers are all modeling the same expectations, the same instructional practices, and the same positive behaviors."

—Kevin Adams, Anson history teacher

Innovator early colleges share a strong culture of ongoing staff collaboration, demonstrated through common planning periods, instructional coherence across classrooms, and shared accountability for student success. In the best cases, the collaborative culture among teachers extends beyond the borders of the early college to create bridges with postsecondary faculty. These cross-institutional connections benefit students by enabling early colleges to know when students are struggling in college classes and by enabling staff at the two institutions to align their expectations, instruction, and content.

Build in formalized, regular opportunities to reflect on staff practices.

To promote ongoing reflection about instructional practice, early colleges use the technique of professional "rounds": teachers observe one another teaching so they can learn new techniques and provide constructive feedback. These regularly scheduled observations are used for professional development, not evaluation. At Anson, teachers have even involved students in rounds. The students put themselves in the role of instructional critic and offer feedback on how teachers



Teachers collaborate closely at Vance County Early College High School and at all of North Carolina's Innovator early colleges.

could facilitate further student learning in the classrooms they observe. "Teachers listened to our advice," said Carolei Bryan, one of three students who participated.

Buncombe has distinguished itself not only in student performance but also in its ongoing commitment to improvement, according to Fay Agar of North Carolina's Early College High School Initiative. Principal Meg Turner uses a "360-degree" evaluation model, in which a team of people who work at all levels of the school give her ongoing feedback. "She's constantly seeking her own professional growth so she can do a better job running the school, and she does the same with her teachers," Agar said. In addition to attending regular common planning periods, Buncombe teachers dedicate each Thursday afternoon to an all-staff teaching and learning meeting on a pressing instructional subject. Topics have included using the common instructional strategies and using the North Carolina New Schools Project's outcomes-based assessments.

Build relationships between early college and college instructors in the same discipline.

Teachers at several of the Innovator schools have the chance to collaborate with college faculty in their disciplines. They come to know the various faculty members' instructional styles and how these relate to early college student success. To improve performance in foreign languages—one of the early college students' greatest challenges—Davidson hired the Davidson County Community College Spanish instructor to tutor early college students twice a week during their seminar period. A college math instructor met with Davidson math teacher Michelle Decker about student progress, which led to the college instructor's attending a North Carolina New Schools Project staff development session that focused on instructional strategies to support high school students. "Over the last two to three years, Spanish and now math are beginning to form partnerships across institutional levels," Principal Allred said.

Buncombe structures teacher time so that teachers have frequent opportunities to collaborate with college instructors and attend the college courses their younger students are taking. The school gradually lessens the intensity of this support over the years, allowing upper-class students to learn to navigate college more independently.



Buncombe County Early College students taking environmental biology for college credit lead local elementary school children on a tour of nature trails on the campus of Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College.

History teacher Tim Arnold supports students taking the U.S. history college course by attending each lecture at the college and then holding his own class once a week to scaffold their understanding of the college textbook, help them create study outlines, and prepare them for the state-mandated end-of-course exam. The college history course is particularly challenging because Buncombe students are taking U.S. history for the first time in high school, while many traditional college students have taken classes in U.S. history, civics, and economics while in high school. However, Arnold emphasizes to college instructors that they should not dilute the content for early college students. “We are real clear with the college instructors that we want their college game. We don’t want them to water it down.” Last year, Buncombe students’ score on the end-of-course history exam rose 6 percent, and 92 percent of the students passed the college class.

Buncombe science teacher Christine Jones supports students in a college course in environmental biology—one she previously taught as an instructor at the college—by holding a session immediately after the class to help students review, make note cards, and organize study schedules. “Our teacher schedules are a huge, huge asset,” Jones said. “Being able to talk to other adults throughout the day means we keep things fresh and exciting—we can innovate.”

THE PATH TO COLLEGE —FOR ALL

The Innovators provide examples of what early colleges can do to move students from high school to college work. Yet their power as examples does not end there. Much of what these schools do is translatable to any high school seeking to put more students on the path to college.

Building a school that supports all students to college readiness takes time and tweaking. North Carolina early colleges have learned from their years of experiences, constantly adapting their programs to serve student needs. Davidson’s principal Allred said, “It’s taken five years to see some of this really happen.” As Warren and Vance, the newest Innovator schools, prepare to support their first cohorts of students to graduation, they too are continuing to refine their models. “We’ve changed the schedule at least five times,” said Vance principal Bullard with a laugh. “We keep redesigning our program to better prepare our students.”

Early colleges and other high schools that seek to accelerate their efforts to support all students can look to the Innovators for approaches that will augment their current work. However, it must be emphasized that these approaches are not stand-alone practices but rather components of a comprehensive, systemic strategy. Executed together, they reinforce one another to build the strong foundation necessary to enable students of all skill levels to tackle college work. While each of the Innovators has created this foundation in its own way, unique to its community and students, they all share a common DNA: a relentless focus on preparing each student for success in college.



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