

## Massachusetts Early College Program Designation

The purpose of Designation for Massachusetts Early College programs is three-fold: 1) To identify current models that are aligned with the five guiding principles and support their work, 2) to promote the development of new Early College programs and to establish coherent, and unifying expectations for these programs, and 3) most importantly, to prioritize efforts to increase equity in postsecondary access and completion by promulgating the Early College model to alleviate many of the barriers preventing underserved students from realizing their full educational potential in Massachusetts.

The Designated Early College programs also fit into a wider initiative of the Massachusetts Executive Office of Education to promote high quality college and career pathways. These pathways include Innovation Pathways and Chapter 74 (vocational training) programs. As a collective, these pathways provide participating students in the Commonwealth with supportive, rigorous academic experiences and career development education relevant to their next steps after high school. State agencies work collaboratively with schools and districts to provide students with equitable access to a pathway deemed a strong individualized fit, with on and off ramps across different pathways throughout high school, to ensure that they graduate with a well-designed post-secondary plan, and a robust knowledge of Massachusetts' workforce opportunities with realities for employment.

### Designation Overview and Process

To support the preparation of an Early College Designation Application, an [Early College Readiness Checklist](#) is available in Appendix A as a reference guide as to whether a program is ready to pursue a Designation. In addition, a copy of the latest version of the Part A Application is available for reference in Appendix D.

In order to receive Designation as a Massachusetts Early College program, applicants must demonstrate, with evidence, a capability to effectively implement all five of the guiding principles. Implicit within this framework are the tactical components of a Massachusetts high quality career pathway more broadly: advising, work-based learning, postsecondary linkages, integrated instruction, credential attainment, and alignment with labor market data. Applicants will note that these components are embedded within the implementation of the five guiding principles. Furthermore, it is essential that programs implement strategies specifically aimed at increasing and supporting the inclusion of traditionally underserved students. These strategies include increasing awareness of Early College opportunities, developing a community of practice, supporting the alignment of high school curricula to existing postsecondary pathways, designing appropriate staffing, and funding supports for scaling up programs as well as sustainable funding for students. In 2019, the Rennie Center published an [EC Blueprint](#) to assist in planning an Early College program for Designation in Massachusetts. Since 2020, NS4Ed has been providing technical assistance to support the development of Early College programs on behalf of the Commonwealth. For more information, please contact Dr. Joseph Goins, [jgoins@ns4ed.com](mailto:jgoins@ns4ed.com) or Kristin Hunt, [Kristin.e.hunt@mass.gov](mailto:Kristin.e.hunt@mass.gov)

The Designation process will typically be offered in two stages—Part A and Part B. Early College programs wishing to seek an official Designation from the Commonwealth first apply for Designation through Part A of the application.

## **Part A**

- State recognizes an Early College Program applicant for having completed sufficient planning and design in alignment with the Preliminary Criteria as framed by the Guiding Principles.\*

*\*An applicant may not be considered for Part B of the application process if Part A has not been approved.*

## **Part B**

- Requires that the applicant has fulfilled essential elements of the Early College program design and has provided sufficient evidence that the program has enrolled students as defined by the Designation Criteria or that the applicant has developed all necessary infrastructure to begin enrolling students upon Designation.

Upon submission of the Part B application, an interview will be scheduled with program staff and department staff to provide an opportunity to answer questions and elaborate on program design. Upon approval of Part B of the Designation application, the Early College Program Director will make recommendations for Designation status to the Early College Joint Committee.

Once the ECJC has approved Designation, programs will be notified and the expectation of five-year performance contracts will commence, with annual reporting obligations and a review/check-in after the first three years. Designation status will be approved for a five-year period which will be renewable if programs have demonstrated they are able to maintain the criteria during this time. Each year, programs will receive an individual workbook of Data Dashboards and submit an annual report. In addition, there will be at least one formal site visit, typically scheduled in the third year of Designation.

The goal of the Early College Designation process is to simultaneously promote innovation in the development of Early College programs while providing clear, coherent, and unifying expectations through priority indicators and benchmarks as to the most effective structures for Early College. Furthermore, the intention of this Designation process is to support and facilitate collaboration among Early College programs across the state, and among the Departments themselves. This will ensure that as Early College within Massachusetts expands, programs will benefit from successful local and national models. Finally, the Early College Designation process is intended to be the mechanism by which the Commonwealth directs and prioritizes state level financial investment in this field.

## **Applicant Criteria**

Applicants for designation must be structured partnerships between one 2 year and/or 4 year institution(s) of higher education (IHE) and one K-12 partner, and both/all partners must apply jointly under the signature of the college president and the district superintendent/charter school leader. Applicant partners must be a Massachusetts public high school, a Massachusetts public institution of higher education, or an independent institution of higher education, provided that such an institution is based in Massachusetts and has degree granting authority in Massachusetts. A formal memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the applicant partners will be required as a component of the Part B Designation Application process. Applicants may apply for a cohort program within a larger school, or an entire early college high school. The Commonwealth aims to build programming that serves larger cohorts of students in order to build strong and efficient pathways for student groups who may have been traditionally

underserved in higher education.

Based on research, the most effective early college models are those that are either a self-contained school, or those with a critical mass cohort size, to allow for growth and exploration of students and prioritization of program priorities within respective institutions. One aim of this initiative, therefore, is to support this larger cohort model as well as the expansion of existing programs. That said, at this stage of Early College growth in Massachusetts, we appreciate that some programs are in nascent and startup stages, and in other cases, expansion is challenged by concerns about feasibility. Therefore, while there are no minimum initial cohort size requirements for applicants, the ECJC is likely to prioritize proposals with critical mass and may defer approval for plans it judges unlikely to be sustainable or cost-effective.