



# EARLY COLLEGE PROGRAM DESIGNATION CRITERIA FOR GUIDED ACADEMIC PATHWAYS

The Early College Joint Committee of the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education developed and approved designation criteria for early college programs in June of 2017.

## Guiding Principle 2: Guided Academic Pathways

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

1. Scope and sequence evidencing a course of study allowing for all students who complete the program as designed to graduate with at least 12 college credits.



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

[Download the complete Early College Toolkit here.](#)

<sup>1</sup>The Department of Higher Education, in collaboration with the three segments of public higher education, has developed “A2B Mapped” degrees in specific disciplines and metamajors that seek to create a seamless transition from two-year to four-year institutions. To the extent possible, high school pathways and course offerings should be aligned with the “A2B” mapped degrees, and these pathways should be an essential part of the consideration of any Early College program design process.