

MA Early College + CVTE Working Group Report:

An exploration of findings from CVTE high schools offering Designated MA Early College Programs

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Executive Summary:

The Massachusetts Early College + Career/Vocational Technical Education (CVTE) high school working group was established in the fall of 2021 to better understand the opportunities and challenges faced by designated Early College programs, specifically in CVTE schools across the Commonwealth. The working group found that CVTE high schools are committed to building and maintaining designated Early College programs for their students to expand access and opportunity to post-secondary education. The working group identified key areas of challenges with CVTE-based Early College programs, including: scheduling challenges, increased clarity on funding, concerns around defining equitable access, and a need for state approved guidelines when establishing designated Early College programs at CVTE schools. Programs determined that Early College Designation through the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) was an important component of Early College programming at CVTE schools, and that an increase in flexibility regarding funding and scheduling would greatly support programs. Through the working group, programs agreed that the mission of Massachusetts Early College aligns with the mission of Massachusetts CVTE high schools. Participants agreed that together, both Early College and CVTE programs create opportunity and access for students reluctant in claiming a college-going identity without access to enhanced student support, resources, and Early College programming that CVTE schools can provide.

Introduction

From the time of conception, there has been an intense interest expressed by several CVTE high schools to pursue the Massachusetts Early College Designation. While it was never the Commonwealth's intent to leave CVTE programs out of consideration for Early College, there are several design challenges that are unique to these programs. There is also an overarching question as to whether Early College fully aligns with the mission of CVTE programs, which is to provide intensive training in particular vocational fields. This in turn has impacted the Designation approval process for CVTE programs and led to some concern from the field. In order to learn more about the unique challenges facing CVTE schools in delivering Early College programming as well as to gain a better understanding of how the work aligns with CVTE more generally, a working group was established. From the meetings held with this CVTE working group over the past several months, it is apparent that the participating programs are willing to confront the design challenges facing them and be innovative in creating solutions. Perhaps even more importantly, Early College programs at CVTE high schools can articulate why they feel it is critical that technical vocational high schools provide Early College programs prioritizing underrepresented students in higher education as part of their overall mission of providing vocational training and academic preparation for postsecondary careers. This report will review the challenges CVTE programs face in implementing Early College, the potential solutions offered by this working group, as well as possible recommendations on how the Early College Designation may be modified to better support CVTE programs in this work.

About the Working Group

As mentioned above, the CVTE working group was established to better understand how CVTE programs meet, or are challenged by, the current Early College designation structures in Massachusetts. Over the course of six sessions scheduled throughout the Fall of 2021, representatives from eight Massachusetts CVTE high schools and their corresponding higher education partners participated, including:

CVTE School Partner	Higher Education Partner
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Madison Park Vocational Technical High School	Bunker Hill Community College
Westfield Technical Academy	Westfield State University
Lynn Vocational Technical High School	North Shore Community College
Nashoba Valley Regional Technical High School	Middlesex Community College
Worcester Technical High School	Worcester State University / Quinsigamond Community College
Whittier Regional Technical School	Northern Essex Community College
Essex North Shore Agricultural & Technical School	North Shore Community College
Southeastern Regional Technical Vocational High School	Massasoit Community College

Participants were asked to discuss a series of topics surrounding the challenges of Early College Designation, including but not limited to **scheduling, EC program enrollment and the prioritization of underrepresented students, challenges and opportunities between EC mission and CVTE mission, and funding.**

The topics for each session were pre-determined based on prior meetings held with CVTE programs, NS4ED (Early College Technical Assistance provider) and Elizabeth Bennett, Associate Commissioner of CVTE, as well as past communication between programs and the Early College Director, Kristin Hunt. Representatives from each program were given the opportunity to suggest revisions of topics and were encouraged to help drive the focus of meetings in a way most reflective of programs. Meetings were held on Zoom and included participation from participants listed above each session. Participants were asked to complete pre-work on the topic of each session prior to meeting to help prepare participants for discussion topics. Sessions were structured to include whole group discussion and breakout room discussion without DESE representatives present, in order to encourage participation and open sharing. Participants were given opportunities to add additional detail to previous week’s topic and were encouraged to share their breakout room discussions with the whole group.

The initial working group meeting was designed to provide space for group members to identify the reasons why this working group and its outcomes would be important to current and future development of Early College programs at CVTE schools. Several programs shared that providing college coursework to high school students while receiving the built in supports from the home CVTE school created important opportunities in expanding college access and readiness. Programs noted that Early College at CVTE schools “expands access in how students view their [own] potential,” and that many CVTE pathways require eventual post-secondary coursework to enter certain fields. One program described their philosophy of education as a continuum, where some pathways lead to college and that Early College “provides validation of [CVTE] programs.” Several programs reiterated that Early College at CVTE schools expands the way students view themselves and the opportunities available to them; Early College serves as an expansion in a family or student’s perception of who is academically or financially prepared for college.

Session Topic Summaries:

a. Scheduling

The working group clearly identified scheduling as one of the most recurring issues facing Early College programs at CVTE schools. The scheduling challenge comes from the unique CVTE schedule where there is an alternating schedule with an academic week followed by a shop/vocational week. This schedule allows CVTE schools to balance their career technical/vocational training with the academic high school requirements. Where every Early College program must find solutions to meet the differing academic year schedules of high school and college breaks, CVTE schools must also find solutions for these fundamental scheduling differences. One program noted that it made significant adjustments to its schedule so that full-time, Early College students attended credit-bearing class meetings during both their academic and vocational week to better fit Early College in student schedules. Another program shared that regarding scheduling, they

felt like a “square peg in a round hole” when building their Early College program within a career technical model. One program noted that it takes “wizard-like skills” to make scheduling work for students, and every program does it so differently that it can be difficult to parse out best practices that will work for each CVTE campus. Programs who felt confident in their scheduling processes highlighted regular and consistent team meetings including leadership from both IHE and CVTE school, and physical proximity between IHE and CVTE school.

CVTE schools also discussed the unique challenges facing Early College instruction at CVTE schools. Several programs expressed desire to offer more courses on the CVTE campus during the school day (concurrent model) but indicated that they struggled to find academic and technical teachers who had the bandwidth to incorporate Early College coursework into their teaching loads. They also observed how difficult it was for students to balance the demands of CVTE requirements with Early College work within the limited school day. This struggle is emphasized by CVTE educational practices, where technical teachers often lead students in cooperative education experiences and are not always in the building to share scheduling time with Early College programming. Several programs noted that the Early College designation process challenged Early College program offerings at CVTE schools. Programs discussed their use of either the concurrent model or dual enrollment model for their school’s Early College program and noted that the rigid adherence to any one model sometimes limited a CVTE school’s ability to offer a full suite of college courses and college preparatory support that an Early College program involves. Some programs shared that they felt the Early College designation process over emphasized students’ presence on the partner IHE campus in a way that was uniquely challenging for CVTE schools.

Alternatively, programs who send students to the IHE campus for Early College coursework discussed the difficulty in blocking off enough transportation time in student schedules to keep the course time within the school day and to provide students with the required amount of vocational/technical training and high school academic requirements. These CVTE schools reiterated that the unique CVTE schedule of rotating academic/vocational weeks creates an extra level of difficulty for students who require transportation to access their college courses. Many CVTE programs added that online/hybrid scheduling options offered a reprieve for the barriers surrounding student access to college coursework while still meeting the demands of CVTE school programming.

Several programs also highlighted that while CVTE Early College programs may be small, they emphasize quality over quantity regarding student experience. Programs felt this was directly at odds with the MA Early College designation and redesignation process, which they feel emphasized quantity over quality. Because of intensive student schedules for Early College students at CVTE schools, many students will elect to pursue dual enrollment courses separate from Early College programming to complement their career and technical educational pathway. While this is true, programs agreed that offering Early College to students enrolled in CVTE is important because the access to college is both complementary to students’ technical training and trajectory changing for students who may not have claimed a college-going identity.

Program recommendations for scheduling include:

- Increased flexibility in Early College designation criteria to allow for more adaptive, CVTE-specific Early College models.
- Greater emphasis within the Early College designation criteria for CVTE schools on building quality programs, even if smaller in size, over a minimum quantity requirement
- Increased flexibility in Early College program model to better fit individual CVTE scheduling.
- A guide of “best practices” for Early College programs at CVTE schools to be used as reference when building a schedule conducive to Early College criteria at CVTE schools.

b. MA Early College Program Enrollment (Prioritization of Underrepresented Groups)

During the working group session, the group focused on the prioritization of underrepresented groups within Early College Program enrollment. This topic was intended to be distinct, for the purpose of this working group, from the current conversation surrounding prioritization of underrepresented groups within CVTE school enrollment and recruitment. Some programs shared that prioritization of underrepresented students in the Early College Program recruitment and enrollment process looks differently at CVTE schools. Many CVTE schools present shared that while their student populations are often composed of majority white students, they achieve prioritization of underrepresented and underserved students by focusing on recruitment, enrollment, and on-ramping of students with low socioeconomic status, EL status, first generation to college status, and students who do not identify as college-going for any reason.

Participants stated that Early College program enrollment has long been a priority for CVTE schools, although every Early College program in Massachusetts approaches enrollment differently. Programs reported that students typically enter Early College in tenth or eleventh grade, but they can also enter in the ninth or twelfth grade depending on their high school's Early College program offerings and requirements. As part of their vocational and technical programming, CVTE schools include an exploratory year in which ninth grade students take part in different vocational areas to make decisions on which pathway they will pursue. Due to the time commitments of this exploratory year, many CVTE schools introduce Early College later than some Early College programs at comprehensive high schools. Several programs discussed integrating Early College exploration within their ninth-grade exploratory year coursework, where students can learn more about Early College as a pathway within their CVTE pathway.

Prior to this session meeting, representatives from CVTE high school Early College programs were asked to provide written reflections on and to describe their on-ramping process into their Early College program. As part of their programming, CVTE schools include an exploratory year in which ninth grade students take part in different vocational areas to make decisions on which pathway they will pursue. Many CVTE high schools with Early College programs reiterated their current use of recruitment and enrollment strategies such as parent information sessions, voluntary family surveys to better identify which students would identify as first generation to college students, and guidance counselor meetings with students. Many also reported several on-ramping supports, including ninth grade Career Exploratory courses that highlight the Early College pathway, course requirements and content alignment across grade levels, and Early College Seminar courses open to all students. Regarding entry, Early College at CVTE schools reported a variety of application requirements, including: online family/student interest form; follow up K12/IHE meetings to discuss individualized student plans; student application with brief essay requirement; and Early College Program enrollment through existing dual Enrollment application for higher education partner, with minimum 2.0 GPA requirement.

One CVTE Early College program discussed a unique, free, and optional summer preparatory program designed to help integrate Early College on-ramping with the demands of CVTE requirements. The guidance department recruits for the summer on-ramping program, but the summer preparatory program itself is open to all ninth and tenth grade students with an interest in pursuing Early College. The summer program operates with the "goal to open doors to students who might not have seen college as an option, such as first generation to college, female students, and racially and socioeconomically underserved populations." An Early College seminar course is offered during both the summer program and during the school year and identified or interested students are encouraged to complete the seminar in ninth or tenth grade so that the student can begin the Early College program in eleventh grade. Any student that does not take the Early College seminar is still eligible for Early College through student specific supports.

Another CVTE Early College program discussed Early College program enrollment as part of their tenth-grade school-wide college readiness writing project. Each tenth grade student completes a "common essay" that is reviewed by the Guidance team and used as a diagnostic in order to "aggressively identify students who may not have seen a pathway to college." The student essay is used as the initial program application. The guidance team follows up with individual students and families, and regardless of essay status, all tenth-grade students receive Early College Program

materials and information for enrollment. The program also noted that while this recruitment and enrollment strategy has helped them meet their goals to prioritize underrepresented groups, the whole-grade essay strategy was very labor intensive for their guidance staff in charge of leading student recruitment and enrollment.

Program recommendations for MA Early College program enrollment include:

- State reported student identifiers of first-generation to college students, to be used in recruitment and enrollment strategies.
- More flexibility in Early College program recruitment and enrollment goals at CVTE schools to include the prioritization of underrepresented students within the CVTE school populations.
- A resource guide of recruitment and enrollment “best practices” that programs can use to build and maintain more equitable recruitment and enrollment structures within CVTE schools.

c. Purpose/Mission of MA Early College and the Purpose/Mission of CVTE

CVTE schools within the working group identified MA Early College to be highly aligned with the mission and purpose of CVTE programs. One program noted “that CVTE students are more ready to excel in college coursework as they have been developing the necessary twenty-first century skills needed to be successful in college and in work through the work they do within their technical areas.” Another program cited a Georgetown University study finding that over 90% of new jobs require a post-secondary degree, sharing: “By preparing students for what Ginni Rometty, former CEO of IBM calls the “new collar” jobs [that require a two-year degree], we are providing more students, especially first-generation students, secure entry into the workforce by providing both CVTE and Early College simultaneously.” For CVTE students, Early College provides a supported pathway from high school to college to career. One program shared that students, families, and employers are “no longer looking at vocational school with an archaic lens of just pursuing a trade, but rather we are realizing the significant opportunity this program can and does provide to our students.” Early College at CVTE means that students have an increased level of agency over their education, and that enrollment in a CVTE school does not mean students should be shut out from Early College opportunities that expand college going and workforce success. As one program indicated, CVTE students: “...are no longer locked into one future, but rather through this program our students are prepared for many.”

This working group session reiterated the commitment and dedication the participating CVTE schools have for Early College opportunities for their students. However, throughout the session, program representatives identified several areas in need of development, mostly those noted in previous working group sessions. These areas include scheduling challenges between CVTE campus and higher education partner; broadening the official Early College definition of underserved students at CVTE schools; funding inconsistencies and inadequacies; and a need for a more flexible designation criteria that allows CVTE schools to develop a unique model in serving students. One program noted that despite these challenges, opportunity lies in how Early College at CVTE schools “can change generations and we need to make it work in any way we can.”

Program recommendations for the purpose/mission of MA Early College at CVTE schools include:

- Increased CVTE-specific support for schools pursuing Early College designation and in bettering student outcomes.
- Greater focus on creating partnerships with workforce development organizations to better support area workforce needs within Early College designation.

d. Funding

The working group discussed funding at CVTE high schools with Early College designation and funding for CVTE high schools pursuing Early College designation. While many Early College programs at both CVTE and comprehensive high schools have identified increased funding as a main priority to better support Early College development, for the purpose of this working group session we focused primarily on funding issues specific to CVTE schools with Early College

designation. While many of the topics named during the working group session impact Early College programs generally (including transportation, staffing costs, teacher/faculty costs, program and event funding, and a need for more consistent and transparent annual funding methods from the state), for the purpose of this group we are focusing on funding issues that relate specifically to Early College at CVTE schools. This spring, DESE and DHE are launching a contracted feasibility study to better understand funding needs and existing challenges within the Early College designation.

Programs discussed several areas of challenges specific to funding at CVTE campuses. In their pre-session reflection exercise, two programs highlighted the difficulties in building an Early College program within their CVTE schools before designation and without access to planning funds to support a foundation for their Early College establishment phase. One program noted the confusion surrounding the distribution and receipt of both the Chapter 74 funds that CVTE schools receive and Early College per-credit funds together. When Early College funding is uncertain or contested, CVTE programs must find other ways to fund Early College opportunities for students by using funds sometimes designated for career and technical education purposes. Given the cost of per-student CVTE programming, this causes considerable strain on CVTE schools and their IHE partners. The program indicated that increased support and transparency surrounding the separate receipt and use of funds would better support CVTE schools developing their Early College programs.

During the session meeting, one Early College program observed the low completion rates for high school graduation and community college completion. The program specified that a need existed for Massachusetts Early College to create better, more cohesive, and more navigable pathways that combine CVTE and post-secondary opportunities for students. The participant cited students in their district who were sometimes known to cross state lines into New Hampshire in order to pursue a CVTE automotive pathway that culminated in an associate degree in Automotive Technology. The participant indicated that their example illustrated the urgent need for Massachusetts Early College to support career and technical/vocational pathways that would create a “pipeline program from CVTE to college” to better serve evolving student needs. To create this pipeline program, more sustainable and predictable funding structures from the state is needed.

Program recommendations for Early College funding at CVTE schools include:

- Increased planning and development support for CVTE school partnerships navigating the distribution, receipt, and use of both Chapter 74 funds and Early College per-credit funds.
- Increased state support for “pipeline” programs for students from CVTE to post-secondary with built-in degree attaining/credentialing opportunities
- More cohesive and transparent funding structures that support efficient communication across CVTE and IHE partnerships

Conclusion: Overall Working Group 2021 Recommendations

Of the CVTE high schools offering Early College and participating in the working group, programs were united in their conversations affirming their dedication in offering designated Early College programs at their schools for their students. Despite the expense and unique design challenges, programs agreed that the mission of CVTE and designated Early College programs aligned in a way that reinforces opportunity and access to students who may not have seen themselves as college-going without additional student support, resources, and Early College programming. It is important to note that participation in this working group was voluntary, and invitations were sent to program leads identified at both the higher education and K-12 educational partner. The Covid-19 pandemic continues to affect schools and communities across the Commonwealth and has created a challenging educational landscape for all involved in student support and services. Despite these circumstances, group participation exceeded expectations and programs reiterated that they believed in the importance of offering designated Early College programs at CVTE schools for the increased student access and opportunity.

In its final meeting, the working group met to discuss this report draft in its most recent iteration and discussed priority recommendations moving forward. Program recommendations include:

- Continue to support the development of designated Early College programs at CVTE schools across the Commonwealth (under current Designation criteria).
- Provide integrated support and funding clarity for CVTE school partnerships navigating the distribution, receipt, and use of both Chapter 74 funds and Early College funds.
- Clarify any state support for any type of “technical dual credit programs that can serve as “pipelines” for students from CVTE to corresponding post-secondary programs with built-in degree attaining/credentialing opportunities
- Development of a state-level resource guide to Early College “best practices” at CVTE schools that programs can use to build and maintain programs. Emphasis given to “best practice” as opposed to “requirements” given differing structure of CVTE schools across the state
- Increased flexibility in Early College designation criteria to allow for more adaptive, CVTE-specific Early College models (i.e. hybrid mode of delivery, scheduling college courses outside of school hours, etc.)