

Strategies to Support Young Men of Color in Early College High Schools

An Education Powerhouse: Massachusetts Early College High Schools

AT A GLANCE

Early college high schools are powerful instruments for success for young men of color, and school leaders must take an intentional approach to remove systemic barriers to their engagement. This report outlines strategies to better recruit and retain young men of color in early college programs and provides examples of successful and emerging practices that support all youth in preparing for their future careers through early college programs.

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Images courtesy of Bunker Hill Community College's Halting Oppressive Pathways through Education (HOPE) initiative, MetroWest Scholars Early Start, and iStock.

About JFF

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A HOPE EVENT AT BUNKER HILL
COMMUNITY COLLEGE (BHCC) IN BOSTON
HOPE is designed to examine and eliminate the
social, institutional, and academic barriers that
often prevent males of color from achieving their
full potential at BHCC and beyond.

Introduction

“I don’t think I would be as mature or ready for college classes as I am right now coming to college because I’ve had experience in the classroom. I know how they work. I notice a lot of freshmen, they’re like, ‘Oh this is so hard. I’m not used to this.’ I’m kind of sitting there thinking like I’ve been doing this for like three years, so I know how it goes.”

- Male college student and early college high school graduate¹

“I decided to join MetroWest Scholars Early Start Program because I believe it is a good opportunity and that it would most likely help me in the future. One thing that I have achieved through the program is to obtain college credits and learn new things that will help me in the future.”

- Male 9th grader²
Framingham High School Early College
Massachusetts

The quotations above represent the voices of two young men of color—a college student who graduated from an early college high school and a ninth grader who just started an early college high school program. Early college high schools enabled both young men to take college courses and earn college credits for free while still in high school. Hearing young men of color speak about their college experiences is unfortunately too rare; due to systemic barriers, they attend college at far lower rates than white youth and young women of any race.³ Early college programs, including a four-year-old statewide initiative in Massachusetts, are making a difference: they're supporting more young men of color in getting college degrees that will put them on pathways to good careers.

Early college high schools are proven, powerful instruments of advancement for young men of color, but the programs must make special efforts to remove barriers to their participation. This report outlines the systemic and institutional causes of low levels of college participation among young men of color—particularly Black and Latinx men—and examines strategies for addressing these obstacles within an early college program. We focused our research on the relatively new Massachusetts Early College Initiative, though the lessons learned apply to early college programs across the country.

This report builds upon a set of principles recently published by JFF to support more equitable outcomes for Black and Latinx youth and young people who are experiencing poverty: [How Intermediaries Can Help Black and Latinx Youth Develop a Strong Occupational Identity: Four Principles of Practice](#). Early college programs are uniquely positioned to facilitate the creation of equitable pathways that truly support all youth in succeeding in college and careers. We draw from the *Four Principles of Practice*—and provide examples of these principles in action from the Massachusetts Early College Initiative—to highlight strategies that increase the participation and success of young men of color in early college programs and, ultimately, in good careers.

Systemic Causes of Low College Participation Among Males of Color

Male participation in higher education lags behind female participation—and has for decades. In 2018, males accounted for only 43 percent of all students enrolled in U.S. postsecondary institutions.⁴ The gender gap is even greater among Black and Latinx youth; males accounted for only 42 percent of all Latinx students and 38 percent of all Black students participating in higher education in 2016.⁵ The college completion gap between Latinx men and white men has widened since 1979.⁶

RELATED RESOURCE

Four Principles of Practice to Support Equitable Outcomes for All Youth

JFF's recent publication, "**How Intermediaries Can Help Black and Latinx Youth Develop a Strong Occupational Identity: Four Principles of Practice**" describes four guiding principles and actionable practices that support more equitable career outcomes for all young people—especially Black and Latinx youth and youth who are experiencing poverty.

The four principles are:

- Apply best practices that support the most marginalized
- Focus on youth assets
- Build cultural competence
- Support youth self-advocacy

In this report, the four principles inform our recommended strategies to support young men of color in early college programs.

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In Massachusetts, the pattern is similar. According to the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, only 17 percent of Latinx male students from low-income households and 22 percent of African American male students from low-income households who graduated from Massachusetts public high schools in 2010 went on to obtain a college degree or certificate within six years.⁷ In comparison, across the entire population of graduates from Massachusetts public high schools in 2010, 50 percent earned a degree or certificate within six years.⁸

The causes of low participation by males of color in higher education are rooted in social, institutional, and academic barriers.⁹ These barriers negatively impact the views adolescents of color hold when they assess their chances of career success, causing too many young men of color to self-limit. They anticipate that they will face daunting challenges or even rejection in gaining a professional career. When young men engage in this kind of ROI calculation, it may decrease their desire to participate in college preparatory experiences that lead to high-paying careers because they anticipate that these careers may be unwelcoming.¹⁰

Adolescence is a challenging time for all youth but can be particularly so for young men of color due to systemic factors that affect how they are perceived. All young people are trying to answer the question, "Who am I?" while also wondering, "Who can I become?" This is also a time when young people "envision their future selves in the workforce, what they like to do, what they believe they are skilled at, and where they feel they belong."¹¹ However, identity development and career exploration do not happen in a vacuum. They are deeply influenced by an individual's family, community, and school, and also by social, political, and historical contexts that have marginalized people based on race, income, and gender, among many other factors.

In an extensive set of interviews and focus groups with youth, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation found that “young people from households with lower incomes may feel greater pressure from their parents, guardians, and family to make the right decision about their education and careers, and this pressure can get in the way of their ability to fully explore a broad range of career options.”¹² Young people are also caught in a difficult bind if their families are unaware of how they might both pursue their interests and earn a living.

Unfortunately, the data confirm that the labor market barriers that many young men and women anticipate are real and have significant consequences.¹³ Not only do young people from low-income backgrounds who have college degrees earn less than their peers who have more economic privilege, but they are also more likely to face workplace discrimination.¹⁴ According to Glassdoor’s *Diversity and Inclusion Study 2019*, 42 percent of adult workers in the United States have witnessed or experienced racism in the workplace.¹⁵ The Glassdoor study also



found that younger employees (aged 18 to 34) are more likely to have witnessed or experienced racism. Racism is a deeply embedded structural feature of work that adversely affects the workforce participation and mobility of people of color, particularly in the Black community. As noted above, the prospect of embarking on a career path that may ultimately be unwelcoming can discourage young people from participating in college preparatory experiences. This is particularly true within fields that lack racial diversity—a problem that keeps some young people of color from preparing for some well-paying occupations.

The Gates Foundation researchers also found that the costs of college topped the concerns of youth of color more frequently than of young people who are white. They worried that paying tuition would compete with their ability to contribute to the support of their families. They also fear taking out loans and going into debt. Student loan statistics show that U.S. borrowers collectively owe \$1.5 trillion dollars.¹⁶ Black students borrow at the highest rate and constitute 87 percent of all borrowers.¹⁷ Black and Latinx borrowers also have the highest default rates.¹⁸ This fact is not lost on the families of young

men of color, who do not want to fall into a financial trap. As a result, they may put off college to enter the labor market, often in a minimum-wage job.¹⁹ Debrin Adon, a senior at a Worcester, Massachusetts public high school, speaks of this common concern: “We’re more focused on money . . . Like, getting that paycheck, you know? [But] if I go to college, I’ve got to pay this much and take on all this debt.”²⁰

Among young people who pause their education after high school to support themselves and save for college, college frequently recedes as a goal after a few years. Catching up appears to be too difficult. That is why researchers use what the [National Center for Education Statistics](#) calls “the immediate college enrollment rate” as a predictor of college degree completion. Early college does one better than supporting immediate enrollment into college—it starts students on the path to college three or even four years before high school graduation. That is, early college eliminates the potential that a gap in schooling might impede degree completion.

Early College High School: A Strategy That Promotes Success

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the challenges many young people face. College enrollment has dropped, and males of color represent the group with the largest declines.²¹ From the fall semester of 2019 to spring 2020, enrollment of Black males and Hispanic males in community colleges nationwide dropped 21 percent and 19 percent, respectively, the largest declines among all demographic groups.²²

Without a postsecondary credential, young men of color are more likely to have lower of participation in the labor market and lower average wages. For Massachusetts, with its high-tech and innovation economy, this is a lost opportunity to harness the talent of a significant portion of its population.

It doesn't have to be that way. There are programs designed specifically to address the barriers young men of color may experience throughout their college journeys. Early college high school programs have proved to be one of the most effective.

Early college programs enable students in grades 9 to 12 to earn at least 12 transferable college credits—and up to



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an associate’s degree—by the time they graduate from high school. Early college is innovative in that it accelerates college and career readiness for students from low-income households, English language learners, and those whose prior academic experiences have not prepared them well for a collegiate path. These young people are underrepresented in higher education and more likely to be at risk of not completing a postsecondary degree or credential.

Early college high schools achieve their success by combining rigorous college-level coursework with a high level of support and encouragement from teachers, counselors, and mentors. Early college programs also help address young people’s financial concerns because students can earn college credits for free, reducing the cost of and the time it takes to earn credentials that help launch their careers in high-wage, high-demand fields. Years of evaluation of early colleges nationwide confirm that early college students substantially outperform control groups in rates of high school graduation, college access, and graduation; however, those outcomes are stronger for female students than for males in matched samples.²³

Early College in Massachusetts

With so many individuals and organizations across the nation and in Massachusetts focused on righting racial inequities, educators are increasingly turning to the proven power of early college programs.²⁴ Early college is a relatively new initiative for Massachusetts, but it is already changing the prospects for young people across the Commonwealth.

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, in partnership with the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, rolled out its [Early College Initiative](#) four years ago, following a national trend that began in the early 2000s. In the 2021-2022 school year, some 3,500 students, the majority of whom are students of color from low-income households, will be participating in early college programs that the state’s Early College Joint Committee designated as meeting rigorous design criteria and goals.



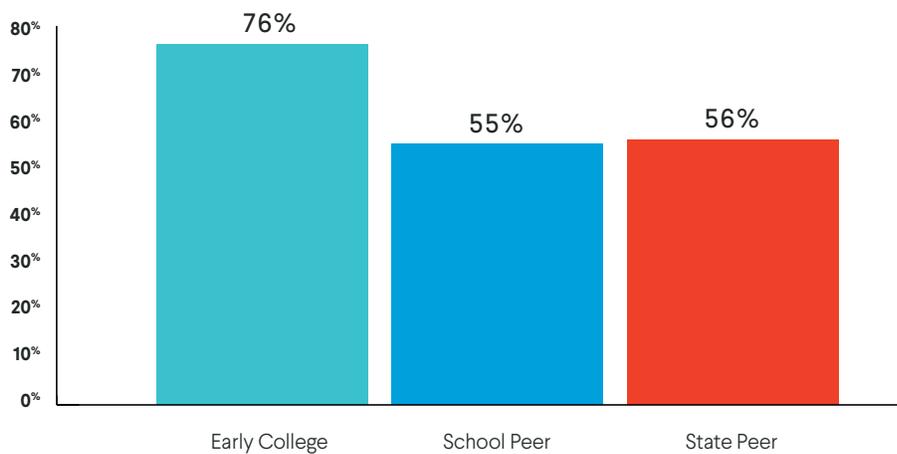
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“Early college high school graduates in Massachusetts attend college at levels that are 20 percentage points higher than their peers.”

As the graph from the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education below shows, the early results have been impressive for all participating students thus far, including young men of color (*see Figure 1*). Early college high school graduates in Massachusetts attend college at levels that are 20 percentage points higher than peers in their own high school and across the state.²⁵

FIGURE 1

Massachusetts College Enrollment Among Students Within 6 Months of Graduating High School



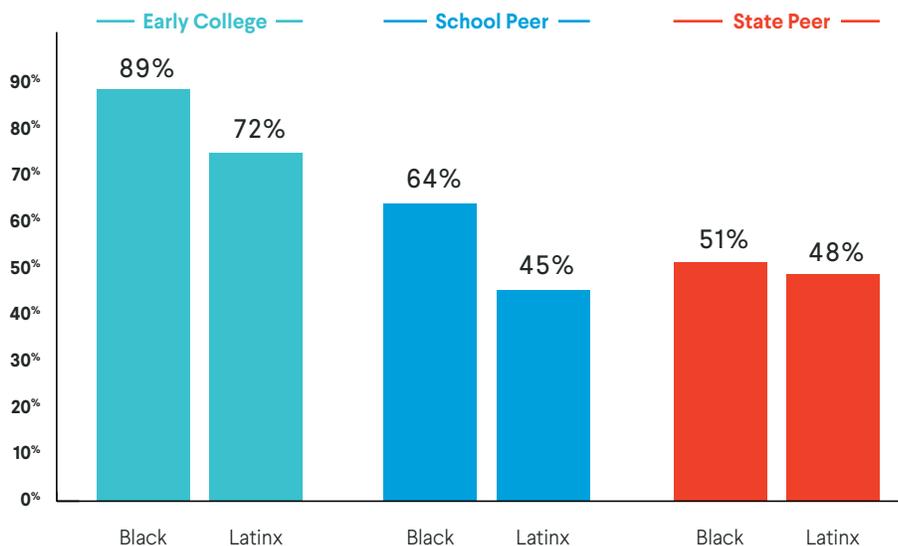
Source: National Student Clearinghouse

For several years, the Richard and Susan Smith Family Foundation has funded JFF to facilitate a learning community and provide support for a cohort of six early college partnerships, serving students in 10 designated early colleges in Massachusetts. Most of the early colleges in this initiative are only in their second or third year of implementation—and this year brought the immense challenges of teaching through the pandemic—so the work described here is still in progress and being refined.

All participants in the early college partnerships are closely monitoring their demographic data, with a particular focus on increasing the number of young men of color who enroll and succeed. The graph below shows the impressive results for Black and Latinx youth who attend early college high schools in Massachusetts compared to their peers who do not participate in early college (see Figure 2).²⁶ Data disaggregated by gender were not yet made public as of the time of this writing.

FIGURE 2

Massachusetts College Enrollment Among Black and Latinx Students Within 6 Months of Graduating High School



Among these, Charlestown High School’s early college program includes more male students of color than female—of a total of 93 students of all races and genders enrolled in the early college, 53 percent identify as males of color and 40 percent identify as females of color. MetroWest Scholars Early Start in Framingham is run by the MetroWest College Planning Center, a partnership formed by the Milford and Framingham public school districts, Mass Bay Community College, and Framingham State University. Ninety four percent of the 80 students are students of color, including 48 percent males of color and 53 percent females of color.²⁷ Salem State University partners with three local high schools—Lynn English, Lynn Classical, and Salem High School. While in all three schools, the demographics of students enrolled in early college is close to that of the whole school population, all of these schools are working hard to increase the number of males of color in their early college cohorts. Of 151 enrolled early college students across the three schools, 26 percent identify as males of color.

Early college programs are laying the groundwork for young people across Massachusetts to successfully transition from high school to college to careers. The goal of Massachusetts’s Early College Initiative is to ensure that every young person earns a postsecondary degree that will provide opportunities to participate fully in the state’s economy.



Other Education Initiatives in Massachusetts

It is important to note that the design principles and strategies outlined in this report have affinities with those in play through 100 Males to College (100MTC), a program funded by the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education (DHE) through its [Higher Education Innovation Fund](#). Both early college high schools and 100MTC are strategic initiatives of DHE's [Equity Agenda](#).²⁸ As of 2018, five cities had 100MTC programs, and there were additional programs to support young men of color at eight other two- and four-year public colleges. While 100MTC works primarily with high school seniors, the strategies it employs are similar to those outlined below.



Four Principles to Support Early College Success for Young Men of Color

As noted above, the four principles for program design to support youth of color and who are experiencing poverty were initially outlined in JFF’s recent publication, [*“How Intermediaries Can Help Black and Latinx Youth Develop a Strong Occupational Identity: Four Principles of Practice.”*](#) Here, we draw from these principles to provide examples and strategies that can increase the participation and success of young men of color in early college programs and, ultimately, in good jobs.

1 Apply Best Practices That Support the Most Marginalized

The most cutting-edge, state-of-the-art college and career readiness strategies must be offered for the populations that have been the most marginalized by the education and workforce systems. And yet, youth from marginalized communities are often supported “with great care, yet limited rigor.”²⁹ That is, many of the adults with whom youth interact are warm and supportive but do not have the same high expectations around their academic

achievement and future career success as for their white students. Schools where all students achieve at high levels apply best practices for academic achievement across the board and expect strong outcomes for every student.

Strategies for Supporting Marginalized Populations in Early College

Early colleges make heavy academic demands on students, but they also provide more support than is commonly available in high school. It is especially important that the rigorous coursework introduces students to college-level expectations early on. In grades 9 or 10, students take credit-bearing college courses that give them a taste of college-level academic work.

For example, after a year of exploring IT careers, students in the early college IT program at Boston’s Charlestown High School take “Information Technology Problem Solving” during their first semester of 10th grade and “Introduction to Creating Mobile Apps” in their second semester. Both are demanding first-year

courses for information technology majors at Bunker Hill Community College. (The problem-solving course was originally created with funding from the National Science Foundation and is a freshman year seminar at BHCC.) The high school and the college provide students with tutors and additional hours of support.

2 Focus on Youth Assets

Young people possess remarkable assets—strengths and supports—and potential. It is important for teachers and counselors to recognize the value that youth bring to learning in both educational and work-related settings. While focusing on assets is beneficial for all youth, it is particularly important for youth of color. Adults must take care to approach young men of color as “resources to be developed rather than as problems to be managed.”³⁰

Research has documented what is often referred to as the Pygmalion effect: Students do better when more is expected of them. Unfortunately, this research also shows that teachers tend to have lower expectations for Black and Latinx students, sometimes even before they have entered the classroom.³¹ For example, if their teachers assume from the start that they will have problems in the required sequence of science and math courses, youth of color may ultimately choose nontechnical careers, regardless of whether they have interest and ability in STEM. As a result, they may forgo good salaries in high-demand technical fields, contributing



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to Black and Hispanic workers being underrepresented in these occupations.³²

Strategies for Focusing on Youth Assets in Early College

The programs that educators design and lead should be framed based on principles of positive youth development that begin with the assets youth possess. The federal government's Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs provides a [comprehensive database](#) on all aspects of positive youth development. Positive youth development programs are attentive to youth's voices, engage them in problem solving, acknowledge the barriers of racism and other forms of discrimination, support young people's development of leadership skills, and value their contributions to their families and communities. In addition, instructors and advisors take steps to inform families of their young people's strengths and accomplishments.

For example, following the principles of positive youth development, Bunker Hill Community College's Halting Oppressive Pathways through Education (HOPE) initiative is designed to examine and eliminate the social, institutional, and academic barriers that often prevent males of color from achieving their full potential at BHCC and beyond. The HOPE initiative celebrates when college students accrue

credits toward a degree, even if the accrual is incremental; this recognition of students' hard work encourages them to continue their education. In the fall 2019 semester, BHCC invited a group of Black and Latinx males who had earned 45 or more college credits to a celebration of their achievement that also wove in advising on how to continue their progress toward graduation. As Nuri Chandler-Smith, the dean who developed the program, explains:³³

When we do outreach to those students, we might traditionally say something deficit based like, "Oh, you have all these credits, but you still have to take more before you can graduate," which is not exciting for anyone to hear. So, when we did outreach last spring to a group of students who were all Black or Latino males who had earned 45 credits or more, we sent them a letter that came from me, the dean. It said, "Congratulations, you have earned 45 college credits. Wow, that is spectacular! That is amazing. We want to celebrate that fact that you did that." Not only did we have a lot of students show up, they brought their entire families. The result was we had about 80 percent of the group persist into the next semester.

Early college partners should replicate such celebrations and incorporate them into events that recognize student progression and success. Early college teachers and counselors should also try to stay in touch with families, checking on students' well-being and celebrating their successes, for example, rather than discussing only academic or behavioral issues. Given that many young men of color work to help support their families, an early college program can also recognize the demands that such schedules put on a young man and help him see what he is accomplishing. Schools can also work to ensure that such commitments are accommodated without limiting course selection and accompanying support.

3 Build Cultural Competence

Youth, educators, and employers each have their own norms for behavior, language, and dress. Cultural competence is the ability to understand, navigate, and honor the behaviors, unspoken rules, and speech conventions of a group or organization. Caring adults can help young people identify the cultural practices to use in different settings. This includes teaching about code switching—pointing out that there are different sets of cultural language and behavior that are expected for socializing with friends and for work. Cultural competence development also

includes helping youth understand the invisible and unspoken rules of potentially unfamiliar contexts such as the workplace.

But cultural competence is a two-way street—instructors must understand and respect the cultural practices and behaviors of the young people they teach. In 1994, Gloria Ladson-Billings published an influential book called *The Dreamkeepers*, in which she laid out the fundamentals of what became an evidence-based subfield in education—culturally responsive teaching.³⁴ Interest in culturally responsive teaching has increased at all levels of education since the uprisings in the summer of 2020 in response to the murders of unarmed Black people.

In short, culturally responsive teaching practices value the varied cultures and identities of students and strive to make all students feel valued in the learning environment. Because in many schools and colleges, instructors work with students whose backgrounds are different from theirs, it is important that all instructors have insight into the history and current concerns of their students' communities. Both students and instructors stand to benefit from classrooms in which one culture is not dominant and students learn to better understand the cultures of others. As one professional development

organization noted, “When students feel excluded and unseen, they intuit the message that they are not valued in the learning environment, which can have negative implications on their learning, mindset, and overall future success.”³⁵

Strategies for Building Cultural Competence

Relationships matter. Some would say that who you know is even more important than what you know in today’s competitive labor market. Early college can connect young men of color with mentors of color who come from their communities and are successful in their careers. The extent to which youth of color can envision themselves working in a career is largely influenced by the degree to which they see people who share aspects of their identities—race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or religion, among others—working in that career.³⁶ Such mentors enable young men to meet people who look like them and practice a variety of linguistic and behavioral codes. Instructors of color often also play this role.

Instructors, coaches, college students, and members of the business community can serve as mentors, but all mentors require training. Mentor: The National Mentoring Partnership, in conjunction with My Brother’s Keeper Alliance, created a [Guide to Mentoring Boys and Young Men of](#)

[Color](#). The guide takes a “strengths-based . . . approach to mentoring called ‘critical mentoring,’” which has similarities to positive youth development.³⁷

Schools and colleges, too, address cultural competence as an institutional responsibility. The Northern Essex Community College faculty members who teach early college students learn about culturally responsive teaching during collegewide professional development days. These programs are sponsored by the college’s new Center for Diversity and Social Justice.³⁸ In addition, each faculty member at Northern Essex now has access to individualized achievement-gap data and has access to supports in order to implement practices to close such gaps. BHCC sponsors similar professional development activities through its Center for Equity and Cultural Wealth, and in a number of instances, high school and college teachers learn together.

4 Support Youth Self-Advocacy

Self-advocacy is an individual's ability to frame and engage in emotionally intelligent communication (both oral and written) to demonstrate their value. Young people who speak up for themselves or speak out against inequality may also bring about change that promotes more equitable treatment. While this is an important skill for individuals of any age, it is critically important for adolescents and young adults, given that this period of their lives sets the foundation for the rest of their lives.



Strategies for Promoting Self-Advocacy

While the COVID-19 pandemic has upended the well-being of many families, youth activism has also increased, as young people are speaking out about the types of society and lives they want for themselves and their families.³⁹ Early college programs can tap into this societal focus on equity to support young men of color in choosing a promising pathway to a career; adults and the young people they work with and teach must recognize existing and potential systemic barriers and obstacles on this path in order to develop strategies to overcome them.

One barrier faced by young men of color is that cultural norms around masculinity can lead to hesitance to seek help, ask questions, or admit errors; this, in turn, can impede their potential for growth and development.⁴⁰ Many young Black men in particular have learned that help seeking is incompatible with the cultural “male ideal,” that they are likely to incur ridicule from peers if they show that they don’t know the answer, and their pride and social status may suffer as a result.⁴¹ Teachers should recognize and address this issue. As an article on teaching strategies from Edutopia explains, “Failure to ask for help can affect students’ academic performance, self-esteem, and potentially their access to learning in the future.”⁴²

Help seeking and its analog—help giving—are important aspects of healthy development. Early college programs can teach and reinforce help seeking and help giving and provide opportunities for all students to practice these behaviors. By emphasizing that students are doing college-level work and modeling areas in which questions and confusion are expected, teachers can normalize help seeking. A second practice is to pair help seeking with help giving. For example, young men of color can teach a class on the psychology of adolescents from their point of view, positioning them as the experts that they are. Another approach is to have teachers facilitate two-way tutoring: Youth sign up to receive academic, social, and emotional support (help seeking) and in return provide support to their peers or younger students in their own areas of strength (help giving).

“I love teaching early college students. They remind me of myself, the child of immigrants, the first in my family to finish high school. But I see the boys as harder to engage, more worried about being masculine, not showing vulnerability. They come around, though—we study culture, and they’re proud of their roots. Not one 9th grader earned less than a B in my ‘Introduction to Anthropology’ course.”

- Demetri Brellas⁴³
Archaeology Professor
Framingham Early College High School

Conclusion

The four principles of practice described above are not exhaustive; they are intended as one useful lens for understanding and breaking down systemic barriers to success faced by young men of color. The COVID-19 pandemic and the economic downturn of 2020 have further exacerbated many longstanding racial inequities—and their full impacts are yet to be seen. However, this moment also represents an opportunity to focus on promising and proven strategies to support all young people, centering youth from communities that have been marginalized.

Early college high school programs are uniquely positioned to facilitate the creation of equitable pathways that truly support all youth in succeeding in college and careers. The key strategies outlined above address the challenges young men of color face, with a focus on navigating the challenging academics needed to prepare for, launch, and advance in good careers, and helping students recognize that they have what it takes to succeed at every step. The proof is in the college credits that early college students earn well before they graduate from high school, accelerating their paths to success.

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