



## Promising Practices from the Woodrow Wilson Early College Network

### **Scaffolding the College Experience**

Making the college admissions and financial aid process transparent  
Friendship Collegiate Academy – University of the District of Columbia

Consider the educational outcomes of a group of 25 students: 100% of them graduated from high school. Prior to earning their high school diploma, 15 of the 25 students earned almost 30 college credits and 10 earned 17. All 25 were admitted to and are currently attending a four-year college or university. In addition, four students were awarded a nationally recognized merit-based Posse Foundation college scholarship covering four-years of tuition valuing over \$100,000 each. These outcomes are striking, perhaps even more so considering that the 25 students in this group are from low-income African American families, the first in their families to attend college.

One of the three principles of the Woodrow Wilson Promising Practices Framework is “accurate information about college,” but the college-going practices of the Early College Program at Friendship Public Charter School’s Collegiate Academy extend much further than simply providing information. At Friendship, *making the college admission and financial aid process transparent* involves walking alongside students throughout the entire process.

Walking into Friendship Collegiate Academy, immediately you know that this school has a college focus. The walls are adorned with bulletin boards filled with college brochures and student achievements. Spending

time at the school, it’s impossible to miss the level of student engagement in rigorous coursework and the visible presence of caring and available adults – faculty, guidance and counseling staff, and administrators. The dedication and spirit of the school staff are exemplified by the Early College program’s college counselor, Ms. Kenya Samuels, and the Dean of Early College, Dr. Arsallah Shairzay, who have devised a comprehensive college-going support system for Early College students. The program is in its early stages, but its college-going timeline illuminates the processes that help to achieve the impressive college-going results that it has seen so far.

### **School Context**

The graduation and college attendance data reported in this brief relate to 25 students who began the Early College program in 2004-05 as juniors and graduated in the spring of 2006. They were the inaugural class of the Early College program at Friendship Collegiate Academy, a 9-12 comprehensive high school located in northeast Washington, DC, serving 1,200 DC students through open lottery. It is a charter school run by Friendship Public Schools which also operates two elementary schools, a K-8 school, and a junior academy (6-8). At this open admissions school that has a 99% African American student body, 92% of about 300

seniors in 2005-06 graduated and a majority were accepted to college. All students at Friendship are eligible to apply and enter the Early College program as early as the second semester of 9<sup>th</sup> grade through an application and interview process. The goal of the application process is to identify low-income and first-generation college students and to raise students' and parents' awareness of the expectations and demands of the program. In 2006-07, there were 143 9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade students enrolled in Early College pathways.

The Friendship Early College program partners with the University of the District of Columbia (UDC), a Historically Black University and the only public institution of higher education in the District. In addition to completing their required high school curriculum, students in the Early College program take college-level coursework in three different styles: 1) seniors travel by subway to the UDC campus (about an hour commute) to take UDC courses; 2) students take college credit courses taught by UDC faculty at the high school; and 3) students take AP courses taught by high school faculty at the high school. Friendship is developing a Pre-AP/Pre-Early College curriculum at its two middle school campuses, providing 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> graders the opportunity to learn advanced English strategies and principles in algebra and Geometry through classroom instruction, NASA space science camps, and after-school and summer enrichment programs. In addition to extending into the middle school years, Friendship is back-mapping its 6-12 curriculum based on the skills and content knowledge necessary to succeed in college work; the goal is to expand Early College innovations and college readiness strategies to all students in the comprehensive high school.

### **Junior Year: Preparing for College**

College preparation begins in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, but junior year is when college going support intensifies. Early College students have been engaged in college coursework for up to one and a half years and they have just entered one of three themed career academies at the school: Arts and Communications, Engineering and Technology, and Health and Human

Services. Choosing an academy is just one step in students' exploration of their potential career and major interests.

The Early College program built a tutorial session into students' schedules to provide a variety of support, especially extra academic help and working on college-going activities. The structure varies, but currently seniors meet every Monday and Wednesday afternoon. Juniors meet at the end of each of their college semesters, between their college finals and the beginning of the next semester, for about a month in December/January, and a month in May/June. The college counselor offers direct counseling service during tutorial. She provides one-on-one and group counseling to juniors centered on searching for information about colleges, considering aspects of "fit" that are important to each student, and exploring majors.

Friendship has established a very personalized approach to their college and financial aid counseling. The program emphasizes direct one-on-one support – *you can't give them a lecture* – establishes college planning schedules – *each day asking a student what specifically they need to do for the next session and give them a specific task* – and offers extensive follow-up. The dean of Early College also will meet with students one-on-one, especially if a student appears to be reluctant or hesitant about applying to college.

Students take both the PSAT and the SAT I in their junior year. The school pays for students to take the PSAT in 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, and 11<sup>th</sup> grades as practice for the SAT. Early College students are required to take the SAT I in the May or June administration of their junior year. Taking the SAT accelerates a switch for students, shifting from college search to college application.

*I realized, taking the standardized test, things start coming in the mail. Things start coming in the mail to them and they want to apply to every school that comes in the mail. I didn't talk to them about that this year, and I'm going to start talking to juniors about that now. I think what I'll work with*

*the juniors on most this year is just narrowing down that list.*

*–college counselor*

The SAT I results and the school brochures that follow tend to heighten students' concerns about gaining acceptance to any college on their list, and the college counselor found that, "a lot of them are trying to apply to 10 or 11 schools, because they just think, 'I'm not going to get into any school.'" The dean of Early College and college counselor attribute this zealously to *overexcitement* and wavering confidence. As the students move closer to realizing their goal of a college education, some seem to *tighten up*. Rising seniors across the country are often given the advice to select a tailored set of schools that range from "safety" schools to "reach" schools, and Friendship's Early College conveys a similar message by working with students individually and as a group.

Along with helping students develop a strategy for selecting colleges, the dean of Early College and college counselor both express their confidence in each student's ability to reach her or his goals.

*They were worried about not getting in. I'm confident that they'll get into a school. I'm confident in them. We just have to build their confidence.*

*–college counselor*

*They are ready; these are good solid kids that can do college work.... Essentially, most of them are now applying to three layers of schools, and each of them I'm confident will be able to get into a very good school.*

*–dean of Early College*

### **Fall Semester Senior Year: An Intense but Rewarding Time**

Friendship's Early College students start their senior year with an academically challenging schedule filled with high school and college courses. Students continue to meet with the college counselor during their tutorial session on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, focusing more and more on finalizing their list of schools and preparing their college

applications. Students retake the SAT I in October of their senior year and also take one SAT II test in the fall semester. Over the previous summer, students prepared for the fall testing, using their May/June results to guide their study.

In an October tradition, Early College seniors participate in a college tour of New York institutions such as Columbia University, University of Buffalo, and Rochester Institute of Technology. In the fall of 2006, they added Lafayette College in Easton, PA to their trip because two of the four 2006 Posse Scholarship awardees from Friendship are currently attending the college. Visiting their peers connects students to a real example of their own potential. In fact, another four Posse Scholarships were awarded to Friendship Early College students in 2006-07, and two of those students will join their peers at Lafayette College. This also signals a growing relationship between the high school and the college.

*Through our Posse Scholars, their colleges and universities know about our students and the Early College Program, and that's a great thing. –dean of Early College*

There are several ways that Friendship Early College is working to build relationships with colleges with the goal of a smooth admission process that recognizes the unique aspects of the Early College model. Ultimately, the dean of Early College hopes to establish articulation agreements for the transfer of credits at popular destination colleges for Friendship Early College students. They have already begun to establish relationships with regional colleges by hosting admissions counselors from George Mason University and the University of Virginia, not to mention their ongoing relationship with partner college, UDC. In addition, juniors and seniors are encouraged to attend college fairs; one is held on Friendship's campus and students may attend fairs throughout the District as well.

School-wide support for the college-going process increases in importance in the senior year. In students' advisory, which meets once a week, they follow a curriculum created

by College Summit (<http://www.collegesummit.org/>), a non-profit organization that provides strategies and tools to help districts and schools increase their students' college-going. Every summer, Friendship sends teachers and students to College Summit's professional development for teachers and peer leader training for students. The school finds that the materials provided by College Summit are relevant and of good quality, but the dean of Early College emphasizes the need for individual attention, mentoring, and strong advising and counseling support: *"It's not a process that you could just give them a set of instructions and an application and they will do it. It's more in terms of the implementation of it than just having the resources."* This advice likely applies to any college prep curriculum, formal or informal, that a school selects to use.

Another critical college application preparation activity is the college application personal essay. The dean of Early College and college counselor help students with their essays, and one of the school's English teachers, Ms. Tindle, works on essay writing with the Early College students in their AP Literature course.

*Ms. Tindle has a lot of experience and she was teaching at the Writing Center at UDC. That's something we want to expand for the whole senior class and establish writing workshops for students. Our plan through the back-mapping of the writing and composition curriculum is that students will develop sufficient writing skills early on. –dean of Early College*

College application deadlines vary by institution, but Friendship Early College has created a timeline for students so that they will complete their applications by the end of December. Not all students meet this deadline for all of their applications, but most of their work is done before the school's winter break. The program provides a worksheet for students to record their application progress and plan for the next steps to be completed. The school staff

also keeps a spreadsheet recording the colleges that students are applying to; their progress in securing letters of reference and fee waivers and submitting each piece of the application such as application form, personal essay, transcripts, and secondary reports; and monitoring admission and selection decisions.

A common question of Early College educators is whether students should enter their receiving college as first year students or as transfer students. The application process for transfer students at four-year colleges is often quite different from a school's freshmen student application with different academic standards, policies, and access to resources such as residential housing options and financial aid. There are benefits and drawbacks to each option, and the decision may be individual to each student's circumstance. The Friendship Early College program's general policy is to advise students to enter as traditional freshmen, perhaps with advanced standing given the number of college credits already acquired, and to work with each campus registrar's office on the transfer of credits. Continuing studies at the partner institution, UDC, may be an exception to this general advising practice. The school is currently collecting data from their alumni to evaluate their success in transferring college credits earned in the Friendship Early College program. Preliminary data indicate that most of the first cohort of graduates from the Early College program received transfer credits for their college courses.

### **The Next Step: Financial Aid**

The dean of Early College nominated Friendship Early College seniors from the first two cohorts for the Posse Foundation scholarship (<http://possefoundation.org/>). In the fall semester of students' senior year, the Early College program guides students throughout the entire interview process, from arranging coaching workshops to boost interview skills to monitoring students' timely response to invitations to the next round of interviews.

In January, the college counselor begins working with students on their FAFSA, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid and other financial aid options, such as DC-TAG (the DC Tuition Assistance Grant Program). Completing

the FAFSA gives students not only the opportunity to receive federal aid, but also is required for many state, local, private and institution-based financial aid programs. FAFSA is therefore critical because it affects many other financial aid opportunities.

*Something to take away to other schools is that the college counseling is rewarding and involving when you are doing the applications and you're getting the letters of recommendations together, and you see the transcripts, and you help them with that part. But when it's time to sit down and do the FAFSA form, that's where everything gets really tricky. –college counselor*

The Early College program uses a vocabulary list to help students and parents understand FAFSA requirements. A timeline checklist, similar to the one created for college applications, helps students keep on track to meet FAFSA deadlines. The application process becomes complicated for students in unique or difficult situations. For example, some Friendship Early College students live with a grandparent who is not their legal guardian, and neither the parents nor the grandparents have claimed their student as a dependent for tax purposes. Students' status as a dependent affects their FAFSA eligibility, and completing the paperwork to become independent adds a layer of complexity to an already confusing process.

Intended to increase the college choice opportunities for DC residents attending public colleges across the nation, DC-TAG (<http://www.seo.dc.gov/>) provides students with tuition assistance to defray the cost of out-of-state tuition at public colleges, and tuition for local private institutions and any private Historically Black College/University in the country. A greater amount of DC-TAG funding is potentially available for public colleges than for private colleges, which may influence students' college choice decision.

Parent or guardian involvement in the financial aid process is critical. In one example, the dean of Early College advocated for a parent who needed an emergency loan from the

student's college to cover tuition until their DC-TAG funding was processed. He helped this parent navigate the college system to not only secure the loan but make sure that it would be cancelled without obligation once the school received funds from DC-TAG. Finding ways to communicate with parents can be challenging and in addition to inviting parents to evening programs on financial aid and sending information home with students, Friendship also calls parents directly and meets with them individually to discuss their unique situations. First generation college students and their parents may not be aware of many aspects of the college and financial aid application process.

*There are a lot of things that, understandably, parents are not familiar with and some of them are worried, and we don't want them to just give up on this.*

*–dean of Early College*

As a result, Friendship Early College wants to provide students and parents with access to accurate information, mentoring throughout the process, advocacy, and any other support that is needed. The first goal in college financial aid advising is to remove financial barriers to college by assisting students in searching for and receiving financial aid, from DC-TAG to scholarships and student loans. Secondly, Friendship Early College wants students to know what options are available to them, so that they are able to make an informed decision about their college plans. The school may be the only source of this kind of information and advocacy for Friendship Early College students, and the staff takes this responsibility quite seriously.

*At the end of it, when we see the student is finally on a college campus in the fall and we hear that he or she is doing well, it's really rewarding. –dean of Early College*

*Once that whole process [college and financial aid applications] was completed, I was ready to cry. It was like, we've done it, and we gotten through this process.... That's*

*rewarding. It made the entire struggle worthwhile.*  
–college counselor

### **Key Factors in the Design: School Culture and Student Ownership**

The long list of college-going supports provided to Friendship Early College students are labor intensive, and many are quite costly. Furthermore, the Early College program staff is small: two people who both hold additional responsibilities at the high school. Therefore, the sustainability of these efforts, particularly as the Early College program grows in number of participating students, is an important planning issue to address. As a result, the Early College program is searching for efficiencies, they have mechanisms in place for school-wide support, and they are nurturing external resources to supplement their current capacity.

Teacher support for essay-writing and the school-wide College Summit program already complement the intensive work of the Early College program staff. The school relies upon college admission and financial aid officers at local colleges as external resources, and they hope to tap partner university counseling and guidance resources as well. Most important to the program's success, however, is a strong school culture that provides an environmental press towards going to college.

*Not going to college is not an option. To our students this is clear, so we are very pleased about that.* –dean of Early College

*They feel like they're struggling towards the same thing and every single one of them is going to college. It's a sort of causative peer pressure that develops, because I know [one Early College student] said, 'Everyone I know is going to college, so I guess I don't think it's a big deal.' I think that is amazing, because a lot of them are first generation college students, for it to become that*

*natural and that second nature.*  
–English teacher

The Early College students know that college-going is a *first destination*. The school requires for graduation that students take either the SAT I or the ACT and they must provide the school with at least one acceptance letter from any two or four year college. A slogan often used at the school: *we don't make excuses and we don't take excuses*, is translated by staff into actively removing barriers. For example, financial assistance is available for test and application fees, and students know that every teacher, every staff member, every adult in their school is available and will help them.

*They all know that [I] will help you. Students have stopped me in the hallway to say, 'My older sister said I could come to you.' She may not be in Early College, but I'm still, 'Come to my office during lunchtime and I will help you.'* –college counselor

*A student was asking me 20 questions [on my way to meet you].... He knows the college he wants to go to, but he still really wants to know, well, 'What is it like? How different is it going to be? What about the courses?' And, I can explain to him the structure of my course, that well, 'This is a stretch course, but all of this information in college is going to be condensed into 3 months.' So he's actually now asking about semesters and what they're like.*  
–English teacher

*Students know that if they go to any teacher or administrator in our campus and ask for assistance; they will get the assistance. This culture is very strong. And that is why we have some students who have applied to colleges that the teachers*

*have gone. –dean of Early College*

Student ownership of their education is another aspect of the school culture. A goal of the Early College program is to ensure that students reach their goals without falling through the cracks. To that end, Friendship has adopted a holistic approach to college-going support, addressing the academic, social, cultural, familial, emotional, and financial needs of students in order to build their competency, self-efficacy, and reach their vision of a college education.

*Our aim at the end of the day is that these kids will take charge of their own learning, their own progress, and their own future. They know, this is something that we are gradually building. The aim, especially with the Early College, is really to empower students... what is it that they want to go – they should develop a clarity of that vision. And, there will be people that help them.*

*–dean of Early College*

## **Conclusion**

In its design, the Friendship College Academy Early College program tackles most of the known predictors of college enrollment for historically underrepresented groups of students. Friendship's Early College clearly conveys the goal of college attendance; provides students with college tours, visits, and fairs; promotes rigorous course-taking through the Early College and AP curriculum; and involves parents directly in the process. These are four of the five components identified by Laura Perna in a national study of early intervention/pre-college programs as critical indicators of successful college enrollment. Through the Pre-AP/Pre-Early College program, Friendship incorporates the fifth critical component: starting by the 8<sup>th</sup> grade so that students have the opportunity to take a college-going curriculum in high school.

Preliminary evidence demonstrates that students participating in Friendship's Early

College are graduating from high school, gaining acceptance into a variety of four-year colleges, receiving significant financial aid funds, and enrolling in the college of their choice. For the first graduating cohort of students:

- 15 of the 25 students who started the Early College program as juniors in September 2004 earned almost 30 college credits and 10 earned 17 college credits by June 2006.
- All 25 students graduated from Friendship Collegiate Academy and 100% were admitted and are attending a four-year college or university.
- Four students were awarded four-year Posse Foundation scholarships in 2006, and another four students received the award in 2007.
- The 25 students are currently attending
  - Bennett College (NC)
  - Bowie State University (MD)
  - Christopher Newport University (VA)
  - College of William and Mary (VA)
  - DeVry University
  - Grinnell College (IA)
  - Indiana Wesleyan University
  - Lafayette College (PA)
  - Morgan State University (MD)
  - Norfolk State University (VA)
  - Rochester Institute of Technology (NY)
  - South Carolina State University
  - St. Augustine College (NC)
  - Trinity University (DC)
  - University of the District of Columbia (ECHS partner)
  - University of North Carolina at Pembroke
  - Virginia Commonwealth University

Tracking the graduation and college-going rates of future student cohorts is essential to determine if these outcomes endure, particularly as the size of each cohort increases. In addition, collecting evidence of students' experiences while enrolled in college is essential. Such evidence includes transferability of Early College credits, experiencing a smooth academic

and social transition to college, persistence and accumulation of credits towards a degree, positive perceptions of their collegiate experience, and Bachelor's degree completion.

As the dean of Early College relates, *"Our aim is really not to just send students to*

*college, but for them to be successful and finish, get their degree."* That is the ultimate goal of the Woodrow Wilson Early College Initiative, and time will tell if Friendship Early College students achieve this goal. In the short-term, it appears that students are prepared to reach it.