JAM REPORT
The Proof is in the Student: Evidence of Early College Success for the Readiness/Completion Agenda
February 29, 2012
Early College Evidence Jam
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- 189 people completed the pre-Jam registration survey
- 45 people registered while the Jam was in process
- 127 people signed on to the Jam site
- 67 posted comments
- 340 posts in the Jam overall.

The Jam was organized into 5 threads or discrete exchanges:

- What data best identifies the EC student
- What are the critical skills necessary for college readiness/success and how do we measure?
- What are the measures of college readiness and predictors of success?
- What are the non-academic skills necessary for predicting college success
- How do we decide what data to gather and how do we collect it?

Emerging Consensus on Early College Agenda

1. Target students who can be described as any of the following: Receive free and reduced lunch, do not do well in school, are homeless or live in specific zip codes, or come from families where no one has completed college.

2. Focus a national EC research agenda relentlessly on evidence of college success- enrollment, course completion, graduation.

3. Use data collection methods that put useful tools and the right data in the hands of practitioners as well as researchers.

4. Make research design a collaborative undertaking between practitioners and researchers.

5. Focus Early College communication strategies on the success of EC students in college.
SUMMARY
The Jam on Early College evidence was sponsored by Jobs for the Future and the Middle College National Consortium. It grew out of an earlier Jam on Scaling the Best of Early College, which made manifest the need for community-wide data as a prerequisite to a large scale take up of EC practices nationally.


The objective of the Jam was to bring the practitioner community, made up of intermediary organizations, EC and college administrators and staff, EC and college faculty, together with members of the research community. The pre-Jam survey indicated that 62% see the data currently being collected and reported as somewhat or not at all aligned with practitioner data needs. By sharing what is known about EC work and by discussing needs and concerns, those organizing the Jam hoped that the dimensions of a consensus research agenda might emerge. They hope, in turn, to zero in on the key data elements that elucidate the compelling value of EC practices.

The Data Challenge

There is a lot of research (nearly) at our fingertips but it is in different hands all over the country. We need to commit to acquainting and reacquainting ourselves with what the research tells us and what we need to know better. It will strengthen our case to stakeholders and it will help us reflect on our practice. By this I don’t just mean “hard gold-standard research” outcomes, but insights from mixed methods and qualitative research about the finer but quite significant factors that go into supporting college readiness and success for low-income students. J.Vargas

The EC community is rightly focused on understanding and assessing college readiness and college success, that is, the capacity of students to be successful in college after graduating. They are looking at those cognitive and self-efficacy skills and behaviors that are predictive of strong student outcomes. There is remarkable consensus on the need for and value of this kind of data. At the coalface; however, there is some tension between the different data sets required for different audiences. School leaders and faculty need information that allows them to shape their overall program and also respond in real time to specific student needs. Advocates for infusing EC practices in districts across the country need qualitative and quantitative evidence of their impact and value.
The Motivation Conundrum

What are we missing? Why are we not able to make the case (for adoption of EC practices) with (our) very high graduation rates, substantial college credit accumulation, and bypassing remedial education? C. Cunningham

One of the strongest assertions against the effectiveness of EC practices is that EC students are more motivated, and thus more successful, than the population of underserved youth at large. While it does not seem possible at this time to unequivocally refute the assertion that EC 9th graders may be somewhat more motivated than peers, the EC community can neutralize the assertion when EC student body demographics parallel those of a home district. More importantly, motivated underserved youth cannot generally be assumed to maintain their higher motivation in an unmotivating environment.

I know the research [done by SERVE of NC early college schools] . . . randomly assigned students by lottery into early college or other schools. So, these were all "motivated" students because they applied. However, the motivated students who went to non-early college schools struggled to complete college-prep courses (vs the EC students). SERVE suggests that it's because early colleges do have higher expectations and support strategies. J. Vargas

Ironically, ECs are committed to nurturing motivation because of the proven links between it and the development of both cognitive and self-efficacy skills.

Research by Daniel Willingham shows that motivation is developed by challenge and the right support at the right time. Also students that show up as unmotivated are really resistant to show themselves as inadequate in any way, so again support and respect in the very first encounters with students are very important and help build the motivation. C. Cunningham

College Readiness: Multi-dimensional and Measurable

ECs explicitly focus on two “buckets” of skills and behaviors. The first are cognitive skills that represent the capacity to accomplish college level coursework. Many ECs use Conley’s work in this regard to both shape and assess teaching/student learning. The Common Core aims in the same direction. The second area of investment by ECs is in the development and assessment of self-efficacy skills and behaviors. There is some recent research on the criticality of these factors. It is the EC capacity to integrate the support required for this focus into the school experience for each student that seems to predict success in college post-graduation. This is why, perhaps, the pre-Jam survey sites college GPA (31%) and COMPASS (31%) as the top choices for manifesting the impact of the EC experience. Similarly survey comments speak overwhelmingly of the value of tracking EC graduate college completion.

Conley's work gives us the challenge to develop a program of experience for our high
school youth that aligns to a comprehensive/complex definition of college readiness. One that moves beyond content knowledge! C.Wagonlander

One of the great aspects of ECHS curriculum alignment work with postsecondary is that the HS faculty who will be teaching the curriculum are involved in creating it—that's built in professional development. K. Vogt

In our research and in our review of the research on college success, among the important skills students need for success are social capital skills—knowing how to navigate the college administration and having the self-confidence to find someone who will be their advocate that can connect them to people who would be able to help them get financial aid, academic supports, etc. J.Ancess

In addition to documenting EC capacity to prepare individual college ready and college successful students, ECs recognize the need to secure comparative data as well. This type of data compares EC students to the population at large but also tracks EC student growth and development.

From our perspective, two pieces of information can be incredibly useful. The first is a record of admissions decisions that includes all students that applied, not just those that receive offers of admission. This can help establish a comparison group for students that receive the early college experience. The second is information on 8th grade test scores. This can help control for incoming performance levels in considering students' high school outcomes (and address the perception that schools accept high performers even in cases where demographics match the surrounding community). That's a researcher's point of view. J.Knudson

NCREST has collected 8th grade test scores for our schools for three years and we have data that shows that students who come in below grade level get as many college credits and have similar college GPA's as those who come in with on grade test scores. C.Cunningham

To make progress, researchers and practitioners feel that they need a way to communicate in order to arrive at shared priorities. While school leaders and faculty wish to have data that enables them to respond to individual student needs, school leaders do share with the intermediary and research communities the desire to have a range of data that speaks to the efficacy of EC practices. Everyone recognizes that it is this data that forms the basis for influence and change at the district and college/system level.

Strengthening the research base on EC success, including "scientific" evidence of success, really requires a partnership between practitioners and researchers. N.Adelman

We have posted some very impressive numbers but a limitation from the beginning
was the disconnect with district-level reform. Michele Cahill speaks of the potential of early college as a power tool for change but we have often focused on individual schools, understandably for some good reasons, but also to the detriment of the movement. M.Webb

Research Questions

For all of the information exchanged in the Jam (see Resources and Jam Analysis), both researchers and practitioners want more and more precise data to both guide more effective teaching and learning and to track and decode the impact of EC practices on underserved students over time, particularly in terms of college completion. These are examples of proposed areas of investigation:

To expand the early college concept and practices more systemically, we need more evidence about how efforts are reaching a broad array of students – especially those that are the “most underserved.” And we need more precision about what types of practices and supports are effective and how they are effective. To make the case for sustaining and expanding early college schools as “proof points” for what underserved students can do with the right support: same evidence or different kinds needed? To inform on-going school-level improvement: we probably need more real-time quantitative and qualitative evidence grounded in understandings of students schools are actually serving. Different research methods and different data points will speak most effectively to different audiences: what works to convince policymakers and researchers (longitudinal, hard outcomes) is not necessarily useful for practitioners (e.g., who need early warning data so that they can intervene effectively. J.Vargas

There are volumes of research on ACT, SAT, Accuplacer, and Compass measurements of predictability. However, I feel strongly about examining/developing other measurements that have a more constructivist and participatory approach. These measures would not only assess and predict, but they would also assist in the development of a student’s meta-cognitive and problem solving abilities. C.Mickens

We have a lot more work to do jointly to define and talk about who our students are and the effect Early College has on them as early as the admission process. C.Cunningham

What are our thoughts on how to best capture the student voice as an indicator of motivation? Do we feel that student and teacher surveys are enough? Are there other strategies we might use? J.Coates