Early college programs grow in St. Joseph County

Early college programs grow across region

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By Margaret Fosmoe South Bend Tribune

When Jordan Cotterman enrolled at Mishawaka High School, he opted to study for a college associate degree at the same time as his high school diploma.

So he signed up for the school's early-college program, which started this fall. "I decided to enroll because college is expensive," said Jordan, who is 15. "It sounded like a challenge for me."

As a freshmen, he's enrolled in a challenging English class with honors students and fellow early-college students. The main difference he's noticed is more homework. "It's not necessarily harder, it just takes more time," he said.

In an early-college program, the high school commits to offering enough dual-credit courses so that a committed student may earn up to an associate degree by the time he or she graduates from high school. Students typically move through early college as a group, and are provided extra support to handle the rigors of college-level coursework and smooth the transition to college.

Most Indiana high schools offer students dual-credit courses, but far fewer offer early-college programs. The number of programs, however, is growing in northern Indiana.

Indiana is encouraging high schools to expand dual-credit and early-college programs as one means of boosting the number of Hoosiers with college degrees. There's urgency, state leaders say, because the percentage of the Hoosiers with a college degree is below the national average, while the number of jobs requiring a postsecondary credential is growing.

Ivy Tech Community College now has early-college partnerships with 13 high schools in St. Joseph, Elkhart and Marshall counties. The number of students enrolled in those programs has grown from 250 students last year to about 1,700 this year, said Sarah Rice, early college/dual-credit director for Ivy Tech's north-central region.

Ninety percent of the college-credit classes are taught at the high schools by high school teachers, and students are not charged college tuition. And those credits are transferable to any public college in Indiana.

"The ultimate goal is a college credential (an associate degree) or a certificate," Rice said.

A college certificate typically is earned by a student taking a series of college courses in a technical field. Earning a college technical certificate allows a high school graduate to move right into the
workforce, or complete additional work and earn an associate degree, said Lisa Shaffer, Ivy Tech's vice chancellor for enrollment, marketing and communications in the north central region. "It builds confidence in those students," she said.

Early-college programs are open to all students, but many such programs are tailored for first-generation college-goers, average students and others who are underrepresented in traditional postsecondary education, Rice said.

Expanding options
Lisa and David Langwell, of Granger, have two children enrolled in the early-college program at Penn High School: son Zachary, a sophomore, and daughter Ryleigh, a freshman.

Langwell and her husband each have some college experience, but didn't earn college degrees. The couple have planned since Zachary and Ryleigh were young children that both would go to college, the mother said.

"You always want more for your children in terms of opportunities than you had yourself," Lisa Langwell said. So, the family jumped at the opportunity for early college when the Penn program started last year. The financial advantage of college credit without tuition makes the program worth trying, she said.

"The opportunity to get out of high school with an associate's degree? It's a no-brainer," Langwell said. She also likes the fact that the early-college students progress as a group, making it less likely they'll get lost in the shuffle in a high school with more than 3,000 students. "For the most part, it feels like we're being given a gift," she said.

Although all three of St. Joseph County's biggest public school systems offer students the opportunity to earn either a college certificate or associate degree by high school graduation, they differ in their approaches.

Penn High School's Academy of Early College is aimed at average students, increasing their odds of success as they move on in college or career.

Mishawaka High School this fall debuted its program with a mix of early-college and honor students.

South Bend's students primarily are working toward earning Ivy Tech technical certificates, which allow graduates to seek employment right after graduating from high school.

Beth Zachery, leader of Penn's Early College academy, explained that Penn's program isn't aimed at honors students because they already are likely to go on to college. "We target students who are reading on grade level and are successful in their classes," Zachery said. "Students are taking college-level courses, but they have the (extra) support of high school. The opportunities for success are great with early college."

Participating Penn students have an opportunity to earn one college credit freshman year in a college study skills course, and three college credits sophomore year in a computer applications course. Most of the opportunity to earn college credits will occur during junior and senior years.

At Mishawaka High School, 74 freshmen are taking an honors English class this fall as the gateway course. Although they aren't earning college credit, the added rigor of the course is designed to ready the students for college-credit courses they may take during the next three years. The schedule includes a daily early-college advisory period.

The program also includes a "bridge" program during the summer — a three-week session to prepare students for the rigor of the courses and provide tours of local colleges.
The South Bend Community School Corp. Career & Technical Education early-college program started in fall 2014 for high school juniors enrolled in automotive maintenance training classes. Fourteen students enrolled and 10 of them are still participating in the program this fall, said Tammy Yohe, career and technical education recruiter.

Santiago Flores  
Mishawaka High School freshman Jordan Cotterman, 15, works in the computer lab on a literature essay during a recent honors English class that includes early-college students. SBT Photo/SANTIAGO FLORES