

Early College earns CELL endorsement

- By KELLEY SMITH - Staff Writer



Early College students gather in a classroom at Michigan City High School.
Photo provided

MICHIGAN CITY — With a few short weeks remaining until graduation for the inaugural cohort of Michigan City High School’s Early College students, the program has been endorsed by the Center of Excellence in Leadership of Learning (CELL) at the University of Indianapolis.

Rhonda LaMarr, the designated guidance counselor for all Early College students at MCHS, said CELL has reviewed the program curriculum and student grades and test scores; and interviewed students, faculty and parents repeatedly over the past four years.

They announced the accreditation on Friday.

Of approximately 300 Early College students, 51 are graduating seniors who will have earned a projected 650 cumulative college credits by the end of this semester. Of those 51 graduates, 40 have plans to attend college, four to enter the U.S. military, and seven to join the workforce immediately.

Madelyn Gondeck will graduate from the MCHS Early College program next month with a GPA of around 4.4 and several college credits and scholarships.

In the fall, she will attend Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI), where she plans to study clinical laboratory science and hopes to work with pediatric oncology patients at Riley Children's Hospital.

Gondeck credits much of her success to the foundation set for her in the Early College program, and the support system she found in that network of teachers and students.

"The little community that Early College has set up is a really nice group of people that help you and challenge you. I became really close with all my Early College teachers, and I still go back and ask them for help," she said.

Another college-bound senior, Gerald Randle, expects to have approximately 60 college credits by the time this semester ends. In addition to his 4.2 GPA and status as a distinguished graduate, Randle has earned nearly \$50,000 in scholarships and continues to apply for more.

He plans to attend Wabash College for his first three years of college and then transfer to Purdue University for the last two years, in a dual degree program for engineering.

“Being a part of the Early College Program has been really beneficial to me and helped me not only academically but also in my social life,” Randle said. “I’ve learned so many skills, like how to become a leader. And the classes were really rigorous, so they pushed me to be better and work harder. Then, along with that came a great set of teachers and a great counselor in Ms. LaMarr and principal in Mr. Lugbill.”

Jeremy Lugbill, the designated principal for the Early College program, said the built-in support system Randle referenced is exactly the facet of the program he likes to promote to incoming freshmen and their families.

“If you could sum up the Early College, I’d say we’re a family; and families celebrate each other and support each other,” Lugbill said.

Freshmen and sophomores in the Early College program function within a small learning community in which only Early College students are enrolled, and their teachers teach only Early College students. When they become juniors and seniors, the students are able to begin taking dual-credit and Advanced Placement courses with those outside the Early College program.

In addition to a focus on academics geared toward the academic honors track, the Early College program emphasizes the importance of developing strong soft skills, including interpersonal communication, time management, problem-solving and more. Such topics are covered during a built-in study period near the start of each day.

Early College also works with organizations like the Urban League of Northwest Indiana, Michigan City Commission for Women and Horizon Bank to provide

additional college- and career-preparedness training. And they take multiple field trips each year to colleges throughout the region.

LaMarr said, “We want to catch the students who are capable but who need that extra support.”

Those supports, said Lugbill, are designed to “help kids reach new heights they didn’t know they could reach.”

He said the target population for Early College students consists of those who are underrepresented at the post-secondary or college level.

Approximately 100 students are accepted into the Early College program each year.

LaMarr reminisced about watching the Early College’s legacy class, as she likes to call them, grow over the past four years. She recounted one of her graduating seniors stopping by her office to tell her that not only will he be the first person in his family to attend college, he will be the first to graduate from high school.

“To hear these stories from our students, I can’t ask for anything better,” she said. “They know our expectations are high; and they know when they walk into our offices that’s what we hold them to. And they’ve met those challenges. They know that we all want the best for them and that we are giving them that.”