

# “Early Colleges”

Innovative institutions attempt to reshape the transition from high school to college

By Ron Feemster

NEW YORK CITY

**E**DGAR GUZMAN moved here from Ecuador less than two years ago. A 15-year-old high school student with limited English skills at the time, he is doing college work at LaGuardia Community College in Queens today. Guzman did not skip a grade or test out of any high school classes. He became a part-time college student when International High School, on the LaGuardia campus, began its transformation into an “early college,” a high school-college hybrid that aims to graduate students with an Associate of Arts degree as well as a high school diploma.

In the next few years, scores of new “early colleges” are expected to open around the country. All are attempting to foster a smoother and quicker passage to higher education. Many, modeled on the new programs at LaGuardia, aim to catapult students directly into college who entered high school at risk of dropping out.

Guzman is one of about thirty 11th graders from International and neighboring Middle College High School to begin the “Excel” program, which will expand over the next several years to include nearly all students in the two schools. Excel students attend high school an extra year, finishing the “thirteenth grade” with an associate’s degree.

Most of International’s students arrived in the United States less than four years ago and entered the high school seeking extra help with English. Without it, they might not have survived in one of New York’s mammoth public high schools. At International, where catching up in English is part of every student’s program, learning a new language and culture has never been considered a handicap or disadvantage. If anything, students there seem to be more confident and ambitious than elsewhere. “I like to put myself in hard things,” said Guzman, a quiet young man who plans to become a medical doctor in the United States and eventually a politician in Ecuador. “I can save time and money if I get the AA degree now.”

Middle College High, which also has a high immigrant population, recruits students who have had difficulties in the public school system. Some have lost a year to illness, to family strife, or to trips back and forth between the U.S. and their native countries. More have simply lost their way in a complicated, anonymous system that serves 1.1 million students.

Both high schools are small—about 500 students each—and they have used their location on the community college campus to foster an adult atmosphere of responsibility and opportunity. Students at both institutions have always had the option to take college classes during high school. This has kept talented students moving forward at International, in particular, where immigrants are often a year or two ahead



Steve Sheldon, Black Star, for CrossTalk

**Linda Campbell, of Antloch University, heads a group that plans to open early colleges for Native Americans in the state of Washington.**

in mathematics or computer science even as they are behind in English. At Middle College, the mere presence of older, successful students has provided motivation.

Sylvester Rodriguez, a 17-year-old raised on the gritty south side of Williamsburg, a poor neighborhood in Brooklyn, is surprised by the ambition he has developed since ninth grade. Many of his neighborhood friends left school without a diploma, and he admits to choosing Middle College because the school gives students the afternoon off on Wednesdays, and because its assessment system, based on portfolio performance, makes it exempt from the New York State Regents exams, which most of the state’s high school seniors must take.

Instead of choosing the easy way through high school, he is now joining Excel, even though he will be in school until 5:15 p.m. every day and must take his share of college-level exams.

“My teachers told me I can do this,” said Rodriguez, the only son of a Puerto Rican single mother who brought him to New York as an infant. “If they give me the help I need, I’ll do what I have to do. If I’m going to high school an extra

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**Cecelia Cunningham, former principal at an early college on the LaGuardia Community College campus in Queens, N.Y., now heads a consortium of such schools.**

year, that's okay. I'm doing something for myself. I want to get my associate's degree."

The group of Excel students is attending high school as usual in the morning for the next two years and making their first forays into higher education in the afternoon. They enter the community college as a cohort and register for the same core classes. Last fall, for example, they took English 099, a prep course for the community college writing exam, and theater arts.

These are regular sections of community college courses taught by community college instructors. High school and college students are intermingled. "Having college students in the same classroom is important," said Bert

Rosenberg, principal of International High. "Our students' attitude and behavior is more mature when they are mixed in."

High school guidance counselors offer an additional seminar class to help students adjust to college. The seminar provides extra time to discuss work in the college classes, as well as a chance to talk about the differences between community college and high school. Not until their final year, when students design an individual program leading to an associate's degree, do they attend classes alone in the general population of the community college. But even then, the support services provided by the high school remain in place.

"Some students may be used to an environment that offers them second chances to get their work done," said David Grodsky, a social studies teacher at Middle College who is mentoring Excel students. "One of the biggest hurdles they face is dealing with new expectations. The college environment assumes you are an adult. There are consequences if you don't meet your deadlines."

Each student in the Excel program took LaGuardia's college reading course over the summer to prepare them for community college classes. All but three passed the test. Rosenberg and Aaron Listhaus, principal at Middle College High, are optimistic about these students' chances when they retake the test this semester. But repeated failures would

create a problem with the cohort structure of the class. Either students will drop back a year, or they may have to leave the program, Rosenberg said.

Faced with the social reality of attending class with people who are no longer teenagers, Excel students discover a new motivation: pride. Few want to be identified as high school students by the community college. "The kids want to start out viewed as regular college students," said Grodsky. "So the assumption is not that you are younger or 'not as good' as the others. Let the professors be pleasantly surprised."

### **A liberal arts public school**

Across the East River in Manhattan, an early college with roots in a different tradition of higher education effects a more abrupt transition to higher education. At Bard High School Early College, near the East Village, high school as we know it ends after tenth grade. At this year-old public school, which moved from temporary quarters in Brooklyn last fall, 11th graders are not juniors, ready to concentrate on the college admissions process. They are known as "year-ones." Instead of lecture classes, they take mostly seminar-style courses with sixteen or fewer students. They plunge into calculus, art history, comparative literature and law, working with faculty who were teaching at colleges before they came to Bard.

As at Middle College and International High, graduates receive not only a high school diploma, but also an associate's degree, which enables them to enter a typical four-year college as juniors. Unlike those schools, Bard is a four-year program, with the final two years of full-time college courses leading to an associate's degree.

Bard, whose 500 students are housed in a former elementary school, was launched as a cooperative project between Bard College, a liberal arts school in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, and the New York City Board of Education. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation provided nearly \$1 million in startup funding.

The urban high school might not exist today if Leon Botstein, the president of Bard College had not pushed to buy Simon's Rock Early College in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, in 1979.

But in contrast to Simon's Rock, an idyllic retreat where gifted 15- and 16-year-old students begin a four-year liberal arts program, the New York City school aims

not to supplant the later high school years but to transform them. Instead of recruiting students who can do college work now, the faculty seeks to groom an ethnically diverse crop of ninth graders, not all of whom come from the top of their middle school classes, into young college students. And

**The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, one of the early funders of Bard High School Early College, has donated \$40 million to launch 70 new early college high schools.**



instead of accelerating or “advancing,” in the spirit of high school Advanced Placement courses, the school aims for the intensity, rigor and self-discipline of higher education, two years ahead of schedule.

Like Bard College and Simon’s Rock, Bard High School Early College begins the school year with a “Writing and Thinking Workshop,” at which students are encouraged to use writing as a tool to find out what they think. “At the university level,” Botstein told parents at a welcoming event, “the production of language is inseparable from the creation of thought.” The goal of the week-long workshop, he said, is to lose the idea that language is merely a vehicle for delivering ideas.

Exercises encourage students to begin with a theme or an idea, to develop it in a series of sketches or improvisations, and to push ahead without knowing precisely where they are headed. “We want students to use ideas as they come,” said Botstein, who is also the conductor of the American Symphony Orchestra. “We want them to write the way a composer writes music, by finding a theme and constructing a piece from it.”

Latin professor David Clark began an afternoon workshop session for year-one and year-two students with a 15-minute free-writing exercise. Students were to write spontaneously on any important educational experience in their lives. Students chose a variety of topics, from favorite teachers to discussions with older relatives, to jobs that brought them into contact with interesting people. In successive rounds, the class shared positive feedback and asked questions of the writer. In the end, the writer questioned the class about what was missing or misplaced in the text. The result, after a week, was a portfolio of rough and polished pieces to be shared at a “celebratory reading.”

“I’ve taught at Oberlin and Columbia,” said Clark, who is beginning his second year at Bard, “and I think the talent level is comparable. There are some who are great, a few who are not good, and a lot in the middle.”

Finding good students has not been simple. Ray Peterson, the Bard principal, reported losing 15 percent of the first year’s entering ninth grade class. The school managed to retain all but five members of the 2001 year-one class. “That was the recruiting class we were most careful with,” Peterson said. “We took chances on quite a few ninth graders and it didn’t always work out. Some didn’t have the habits of mind to study. We asked them to leave.” The school is not just looking for raw academic talent. They want students who can grow into self-directed individuals who see learning as the primary focus of high school.

At the same time, the school is sensitive to diversity issues. “We don’t want the student body to skew too white,” said Peterson, who noted that the city high schools requiring rigorous admissions exams tend to enroll disproportionate numbers of Jewish and Asian students. Five students interviewed by *National CrossTalk*—all of them white—discovered Bard when they were investigating Simon’s Rock as a boarding school. That school charges upwards of \$35,000 per year. Bard is a free public high school.

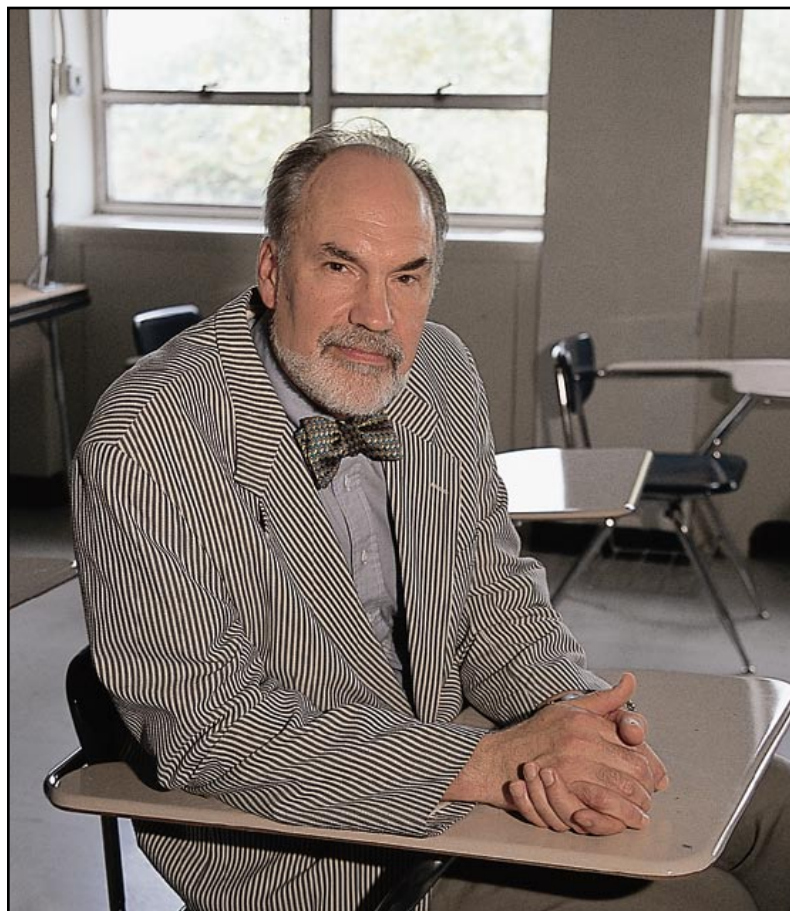
Older students, the ones who enter as year-ones at about the age of 16, tend to come to Bard because they want a new

challenge. “Here I have to actually think,” said Joseph Robateau, now 17, a year-two who left an accelerated cohort of 50 students at Brooklyn Technical, one of New York City’s three most selective public high schools, to enter Bard when it opened. “There are no wrong answers here if you can argue your point. At Tech we had blocked classes with more work than other students, more math, and math labs.

But we really just took tests about the teachers’ ideas. You could figure out what they wanted. So you did that sometimes instead of figuring out what you thought yourself?”

Of course, getting a jump on college is an added attraction. For Liz Dempsey, 18, who was attending Convent of the Sacred Heart, a private girls school on Manhattan’s tony Upper East Side, there were financial incentives as well. “My family saved four years of tuition,” she said. “Two years in high school and two years in college.” Even so, her decision to transfer had more to do with finding a new style of school. “Junior and senior year were just going to be about competing for good grades in Advanced Placement courses,” said Dempsey, who parlayed a year of Chinese language at Bard into a three-week fellowship to China last summer. “It sounds like a cliché, but we spend a lot of time here working

**Bard High School Early College aims for the intensity, rigor and self-discipline of higher education, two years ahead of schedule.**



**Ray Peterson, principal at Bard High School Early College, says many ninth graders lack the “habits of mind to study” required of students in the accelerated program.**

Lisa Quiñones, Black Star, for CrossTalk

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together to find an answer. We trust each other enough as colleagues and peers to talk about opinions.”

Ashli Haynes, a 17-year-old actress and violinist, left the Professional Performing Arts School to find more challenging academics. “People were distracting and rowdy in class,” she said. “They came to that school to be whatever fabulous thing they were trying to be. They didn’t care about the rest of the work.” Haynes is taking calculus, Spanish, law, chemistry

and jazz ensemble in addition to the required year-one seminar.

At the end of the first year of college last spring, when Bard was at its former location in Brooklyn, students in calculus class worked on expressing trigonometric functions as power functions. Meanwhile, a year-one seminar was comparing Hamlet and Don Giovanni, and an art history class was locating the techniques and subject matter of Monet and Renoir in the technological changes of 19th century France. This year, the school is expanding its music program with the help of the American Symphony Orchestra, which is donating funds to purchase musical instruments for the school’s chamber orchestra and jazz ensemble.

Teachers in most college courses at Bard High School Early College hold doctoral degrees. They spend the first year

or two getting certified as high school teachers by the state. Bard has found it necessary to supplement some teachers’ salaries to recruit them from university positions.

With all of its emphasis on academics, Bard attracts students looking for identity and affirmation as well as a more rigorous classroom experience. Nyla Rock, 17, who transferred from A. Philip Randolph High School in Harlem, said her former school was too large and too crowded. Almost any student transferring to International High or Middle College could have told that part of her story.

Equally important, she said, was the fact that the learning process was passive and anonymous. “We had 25 or 35 people in every class,” said Rock, who founded Bard’s literary club and is planning to attend a selective women’s college like Wellesley or Sarah Lawrence or Smith. “You couldn’t just speak up if you had an idea. Here my smallest class had five students.”

### More early colleges

As much as the schools differ from one another, Bard, Middle College and International High School are all part of a common quest to reshape the transition to college, which often seems to waste most of the senior year of high school. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, one of the early funders of Bard High School Early College, has donated \$40 million to launch 70 new early college high schools across the country.

Most of these schools will aim to serve students more like those at Middle College than at Bard, but organizers of the new schools have been regular visitors to the Bard and LaGuardia campuses. “We see these schools as a way of

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**S**INCE *NATIONAL CROSSTALK* first reported on “early colleges” in its winter 2003 issue, the idea has spread widely. In the 2007-08 school year more than 40,000 students, in 200 schools, in 24 states and the District of Columbia, were attending these schools.

These numbers were provided by Jobs for the Future, the Boston-based organization that coordinates the Early College Initiative, which is funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. “This has grown into what we like to call a movement,” said Michael Webb, associate director of Jobs for the Future.

The eventual goal of the Gates initiative is 250 schools, enrolling 100,000 students, Webb said.

Most early colleges, or early college high schools as they are sometimes called, include students from grades nine through 12, though some begin as early as sixth grade and others continue through a “13th” grade. The schools are small—500 or fewer students. Most are located on either a community college or four-year college campus, where students take a mixture of high school and college courses. In many cases they are able to obtain, simultaneously, both a high school diploma and a community college associate’s degree or its equivalent.

Early Colleges are “aimed mainly at the underserved and the underrepresented” in higher education, Webb said—low-income

students, minority students and first-generation college students. Two-thirds of early college students are African American or Hispanic, according to Jobs for the Future. Many of these students had dropped out and had given up on education.

Working with students who have performed poorly in traditional schools “has been hard work—harder than we thought,” said Cecilia Cunningham, who was principal of one of the first early colleges—International High School, located on the LaGuardia Community College campus in the New York City borough of Queens.

“A big ‘aha! moment’” was the discovery that these students require more support, both academic and non-academic, Cunningham said in an interview. “Many of these teenagers have a feeling of shame about school,” she said. “They don’t take advantages that middle class kids do. Instructors and people who run these programs must be aware of that.”

The International High School and others have added daily student sessions with their high school teachers and frequent meetings with instructors who teach the college courses. A fifth year has been added to the program to allow time for these extra support services.

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**—Michael Webb, associate director of Jobs for the Future**

bridging the gap to higher education,” said Tom Vander Ark, executive director of the foundation’s education program. “In effect, we want to bring higher education to people that could be left behind—students whose parents may not have graduated from high school, much less attended college.”

The funding is being funneled through intermediaries that differ from one another as dramatically as Bard and International High. They will all be mandated to serve at-risk students, but the schools will be as different as their locations and the communities they serve: Indian reservations in Washington state; inner cities of Cleveland and Washington, D.C.; rural areas in Utah and the south; and mainstream college campuses across the country. The “intermediate” with the most experience starting early colleges is the Middle College National Consortium, an organization of high schools that, like Middle College and International, are located on community college campuses.

Cecelia Cunningham, the head of the consortium, was principal of Middle College High School at LaGuardia until Aaron Listhaus took over last fall. She expects the conversion of some two dozen middle colleges into early colleges to reawaken a perception of them as advanced placement programs, a view she plans to fight. “I don’t really care how people look at these schools,” she says. “I’m going to keep them focused on the same type of students.”

Other intermediaries express different values. Antioch University in Seattle, for example, plans to start at least eight schools for Native Americans in the state of Washington. And for Linda Campbell, an Antioch professor who chairs First People’s Education at Antioch and heads up the early college project there, the new schools represent

an opportunity to bring more Native American teaching and learning into the classroom. This curricular change, Campbell believes, will do as much to keep students in school as increasing academic support programs.

Two intermediaries focus on preparing teachers to offer a richer learning environment for students. SECME (formerly called the Southeastern Consortium for Minorities in Engineering) is starting eight schools as partnerships between local school districts and historical black colleges. The Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation plans to start early colleges on a “representative cross section” of college campuses across the country. At both organizations, in keeping with their traditional strengths, they will aim at deepening teachers’ ties to their disciplines. “If 16-year-olds are ready for college, then what holds them back is the mode of instruction,” said Robert Weisbuch, Wilson’s president. “We need exceptional teachers to raise the norm of instruction.”

In Utah, the new schools fill a need created by the state’s New Century scholarship program, which provides a 75 percent tuition scholarship at any state university to students who finish high school with an associate’s degree. A student who completes the AA degree at the age of 17 could graduate from college at 19. Nathan Pierce, an official with the Utah Partnership Foundation, which is starting early colleges there, tied the state’s scholarship program and its friendly policy on

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Cunningham is now executive director of the Middle College National Consortium, which includes 21 early colleges, enrolling about 6,000 students in ten states. In the 2006-07 school year, 78 percent of the students were from racial/ethnic minority groups; 62 percent were eligible for federal lunch programs.

Sixty-three percent of the students attending consortium schools were enrolled in college courses in 2006-07. Twelfth graders accumulated an average of 31 college credits. Ninety-two percent passed their college courses; 56 percent earned A’s and B’s.

The North Carolina New Schools Project, proposed by Governor Mike Easley and financed largely by the Gates initiative, included 42 early college programs, enrolling more than 5,000 students in the 2007-08 school year, said Geoff Coltrane, research and communications director for the project.

Thirty-seven of the schools were on community college campuses, four were at four-year institutions, and one was an online “virtual” school for students in regions of the state where there are no college campuses.

Fifty-six percent of the students were white, 30.8

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percent African American, 7.7 percent Hispanic.

Early College enrollments “should mirror the area’s population,” Coltrane said. This means there are more African Americans in urban schools, fewer in heavily white western North Carolina. However, Coltrane said, “we’re doing a pretty solid job of reaching first-generation college students” in that part of the state.

Because the New Schools Project was only four years old in fall 2008, there was no information about how well students were doing, in comparison with those attending traditional schools. But “we have seen a significant decline” in dropout rates, Coltrane said.

Although the early college idea seems to be catching on, there still are “significant obstacles,” said Michael Webb of Jobs for the Future. “Combining K-12 and higher education is always a problem,” he said. And the question of “how to pay for it, after the starting grants run out” remains unanswered.

Many states have a single fund to finance both K-12 schools and public colleges and universities, leading to intense competition between the systems. And some states “are reluctant to pay for college courses for high school students,” Webb said.

Despite these difficulties, “we’re going to see a huge increase in states using this approach to improve education results,” Cecilia Cunningham predicted. “As states employ this as a reform strategy, it will be used for a wider range of kids.”

—William Trombley



dual enrollment to the influence of the Mormon Church.

Although he was careful to say that there was no evidence of an official tie to the church, he noted that members of the Mormon faith generally take two years off to proselytize abroad when they are about 19 or 20. "If this program had been available when I was in high school," Pierce notes, "I might have finished college before I went away."

Except for the Middle College Consortium, which sponsors the LaGuardia program, none of these programs has yet opened a school. Each intermediary is currently engaged in a planning year. Each will open two or three schools during the 2002-03 school year, and additional schools during the next five years. Each school receives three years of funding, counting the planning year. The overall project is huge. Even the most sympathetic observers wonder if it will come off as planned.

There is more to creating a new school than recruiting talented students and teachers, of course. The finances are complicated, and three years of Gates funding hardly guarantees that a school will become a self-sustaining institution. About \$600,000 in planning and startup money is budgeted for each of the new schools (\$1,500 per pupil in a 400-student school, over three years) said Vander Ark. If an existing school is being restructured, the funding is cut in half.

As much as a third of the money will stay with the intermediaries, which plan and select school sites, negotiate finances with school districts and colleges, hire core staff, and so on. The remaining two-thirds must suffice to get the school anchored in a public funding cycle that guarantees its survival without tuition.

"We try to find an amount of money that encourages people to carry out plans," said Vander Ark. "But not so much money that we supplant public funds or create something that is not replicable. They will need local support and local matching funds." The Ford, Carnegie and Kellogg foundations also have contributed funds.

Funding an institution that crosses traditional boundaries between secondary and higher education can also require changes in state laws that govern dual enrollment in high schools and colleges. In the state of Washington, for example, a legislative initiative called Running Start, which passed in 1992, permits any high school student who passes an entrance exam to take courses at community colleges without paying tuition.

Bard College President Leon Botstein, whose book,



Steve Sheldon, Black Star, for CrossTalk

**Tom Vander Ark directs education programs for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which will spend \$40 million to start new early colleges.**

"Jefferson's Children," first attracted the Gates Foundation's attention and funding, is a warm supporter of the early college movement. Yet even he turns a skeptical eye on the Gates project. "Starting a new school is more difficult than it looks," he told the parents of Bard students this fall. "I believe that Gates will end up spending more money and starting fewer schools than they have planned." ♦

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