
Seminar: A Support Program for High School Students Undertaking College Courses

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Introduction

Education policy agendas are calling for high schools to blend rigorous curriculum with supports to help students be college-ready upon graduation. Research suggests that assistance programs incorporating personalization and supportive features similar to those found in advisory programs, where small groups of students work closely with an adult to receive ongoing targeted assistance, contribute to higher gains in achievement (Darling-Hammond & Friedlaender, 2008; Lee & Ready, 2009). Middle College-Early College High Schools (MC-ECs) are designed to bridge high school and college by providing traditionally underserved students with coursework and experiences that lead to increased access to and success in college. A key aspect of MC-ECs is the implementation of academic and social supports.

MC-ECs, small schools located on or near college campuses, are overseen by the Middle College National Consortium (MCNC), a professional network of secondary schools that received funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation beginning in 2002 to develop or redesign Early Colleges. A core feature of MC-ECs are high school-college partnerships, affording students the opportunity to concurrently earn their high school diplomas while completing as much as two years of transferable college credit or an Associate's degree. Students begin taking college courses as early as 9th grade, and graduate high school with an average of 27 college credits earned.

To assist students undertaking college courses, MC-ECs offer *seminar*, designed to help students "unpack" college-level coursework, navigate college systems, and receive personal and social support. At MC-ECs, seminar is viewed as a means to provide students with the additional support needed to succeed in college.

In the 2009-2010 academic year, MCNC and the National Center for Restructuring Education,

Schools and Teaching (NCREST) conducted a study of seminar implementation at MC-ECs, with particular interest in how seminar may increase the success of college course-taking students.

Overview

To learn about the key design elements of seminar, coaches from MCNC and researchers from NCREST conducted site visits to 11 Early College High Schools located across 6 states in fall 2009 and winter 2010¹. Interviews were conducted with approximately 10 administrators, 40 teachers and counselors and about 100 college course-taking high school students.

Data were collected through 1) semi-structured interviews with teachers, administrators, and counselors, 2) student focus groups, and 3) classroom observations. NCREST developed three major categories that framed data analysis: *design features, goals and activities, and the perceived value of seminar*. Within these categories, emerging themes were identified. Key findings are presented in this brief.

Images of Seminar

"What's seminar?" was a common response given by interviewees when asked initial questions about seminar. An interesting finding was the variability in organization and content found in seminar implementation – including what schools have chosen to name the support.² However, every MC-EC visited held structured sessions of some type designed to support students in their college classes.

¹ The MCNC oversees 30 schools. Of this number, 19 are Early College schools.

² Four schools designate the support "seminar." Seven schools use names such as advisory, support class, recitation class, guidance studies, AVID and study lab/college support).

Design features

Frequency and duration. In all but one school in which seminar meets daily, seminars occur 1- 4 times per week, ranging from 40-120 minutes per session. Many schools schedule seminar on days alternating with college course(s) meeting times. (e.g. Tuesday/Thursday 90 minute course may have its accompanying seminar scheduled on Monday, Wednesday and/or Friday for all or a portion of the 90 minute block).

Targeted students. Seminar was originally designed to support college course-taking students. In all but one school, which requires *all* students to participate in a seminar, this is the case. Five schools offer additional “introduction to college” style seminars for students who have not yet begun college courses (i.e. visits to the partner college campus, learning study strategies and academic planning, career/major exploration).

Due to scheduling constraints, eight schools must program students, enrolled in different course, in the same seminar. However, three schools are able to coordinate seminar around cohorts of students taking the same college course(s).

Some schools do not mandate seminar attendance for their 5th year or 13th grade students, many of whom are *only* taking college courses. However, these schools require periodic “check-in” during seminar periods or have students make weekly appointments with seminar instructors. In two schools, attendance is required for selected students, based on teacher or counselor recommendations (informed by academic performance).

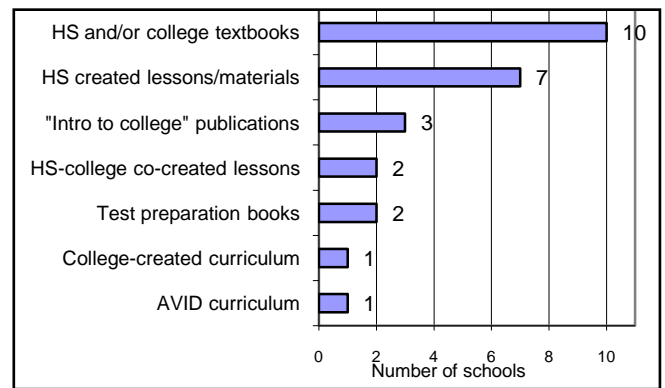
Credit and assessment. Six schools offer seminar for high school credit, ranging from .5-3.0 credits. Five schools require students to attend a non-credit seminar. Credit-bearing or not, none of the seminars involve grading students on material learned. Rather, students receive pass/fail marks. In a number of schools, seminar is attached to incentives such as priority college course registration or it is designated as a requirement to graduate. However, all schools maintain attendance, participation, or assignment records, to help determine whether students receive a pass for graduation and/or credit.

Materials and curriculum. Few seminars utilize a specific curriculum (see Figure 1). Aside from one school using AVID, a multi-level assistance program with a structured curriculum, in most schools, seminar uses teacher and/or counselor-developed lessons addressing particular topics

such as “college knowledge” (i.e. using syllabi, time management, self-advocacy, using college textbooks). As the semester goes on, seminar often becomes a setting where students are provided with help in specific courses or use the time to study and do homework. At this point, high school and college texts become the main resources.

In schools where seminar is directly tied to a college course, the curriculum is typically designed to complement and reinforce college course content. Still other seminars incorporate supplemental materials such as test preparation books and college readiness or “introduction to college” publications.

Figure 1: Curriculum or materials



High school-college collaboration. As shown in Figure 2, schools collaborate with college partners in a variety of ways. Some schools work with colleges through curriculum planning, co-teaching, and academic performance meetings. Often, high school teachers and college instructors exchange contact information to develop a system for tracking student behavior and academic progress. In one school, seminar teachers’ attend college course sessions and plan seminar lessons accordingly. Two schools, indicating minimal to no collaboration with colleges around seminar, expressed their intent to build collaboration in the future.

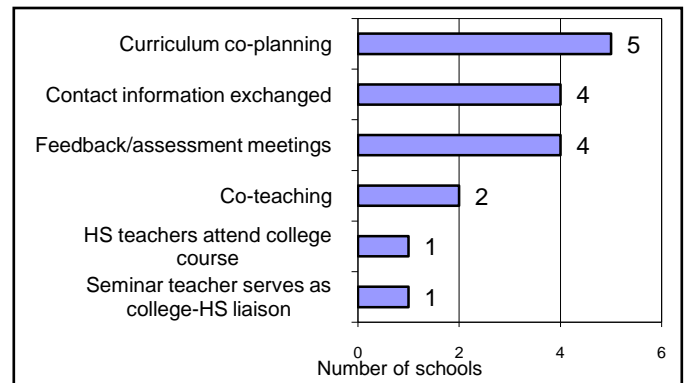


Figure 2: High School and Partner College Collaboration Goals and activities. While seminar implementation varied, perceptions of the goals and value of seminar did not. Across schools, respondents indicated that the goals of seminar were one or more of the following: a) to give additional time for academic assistance, b) to instruct and reinforce key college readiness skills and behaviors, and c) to provide information and help with college and financial aid applications. Table 1 outlines the types of seminar activities implemented to support these goals.

The Value of Seminar

Students believe 1) having an academic assistance system and 2) sense of care and high expectations from high school teachers are the most important features of seminar. Students appreciate having extra time for homework and studying, peers becoming academic resources for one another, and a having a forum for sharing college course-related issues, ideas, questions, and opinions. These feelings were expressed in the following selected quotes from student focus groups:

[The seminar teacher] helped build my confidence by explaining the college course work, and I did better in the class.

Table 1: Seminar goals and types of activities

It makes you study and do your homework even if you don't feel like it.

It helps to have material explained in a different way to better understand.

It has helped me go from being a C student in one of my classes to being a B student.

It's good to have a space to share information and questions with everyone.

Similarly, teachers felt that the additional time for academic help has positively influenced student performance in college courses. Some schools cited seminar as contributing to higher college GPAs and college entrance exam scores and increased pass rates and credit accumulation.

It is apparent that students need a structure for a place to study and a mentor to guide them through studying.

Removing seminar would be detrimental to some students taking [college] courses for the first time.

Students also felt seminar teachers helped them to strive for higher academic gains, while also providing emotional and social support:

GOALS	SAMPLE ACTIVITIES
Academic support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students work independently, in pairs, or small groups to work on homework or study • Peer-peer support • Flexible movement between concurrently scheduled seminars so students may receive specific help such as tutoring from another seminar instructor • Use of library or computer labs • Teacher-student one-on-one or small group support • High school/college tutors work with students • Content support through math, literacy, technology exercises and assignments
College readiness skills and behaviors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Test preparation/test-taking skills • Questioning techniques • Problem-solving strategies • Socratic seminars • Research and writing exercises (managing, producing, and editing work) • Note-taking • Peer-editing • Exercises in goal-setting, time management, study strategies • Public speaking • Contextual college knowledge/Navigating college systems & campus (going over syllabi and course catalogs, using college textbooks, visiting college facilities & administrative offices, course registration, using instructor office hours, familiarization with different teaching styles, social transition from high school to 2 year college or 4 year college)
College application & financial aid assistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussions/exercises related to college and financial aid application processes (researching colleges & universities and majors, writing essays/personal statements, asking for letters of recommendation, applying for scholarships and federal aid)

It's good to know that the teachers understand what we're going through.

I like the mentoring and one-on-one concern and support.

Rigor and expectations are high.

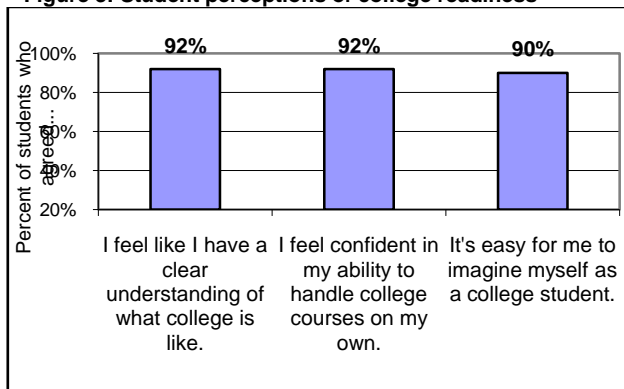
We can share college-specific problems with the teacher and you're told, 'we'll go over this together and we'll figure this out.'

It's good to have a teacher who makes sure we're on top of our game in high school and college.

When [teachers] check up on you, you feel like they care about you and you want to make them proud and make yourself proud.

In addition to enhanced student performance, two other benefits were cited by teachers, counselors, and administrators. First, they have observed the emergence of a college going culture, as evidenced by student engagement in "college speak," meaning informal and formal conversations about college-related issues such as credit accumulation, college majors, GPAs, course offerings, advocating for themselves in interactions with college faculty, and viewing themselves as college students. As shown in Figure 3, these perceptions parallel findings from a survey given to MCNC graduating students.³

Figure 3: Student perceptions of college readiness



³ A 2009-2010 survey developed by NCREST was offered to all graduating MCNC Early College students in spring 2010 (N=1098).

A second benefit cited by practitioners is the way a system for student performance "check-in" is embedded in seminar. Seminar gives teachers a scheduled time in which to regularly ask students about progress in courses, provide them with assignment and deadline reminders, and intervene when necessary (i.e. refer students to formal tutoring, communicate with the college instructor). Teachers expressed feeling better positioned to provide targeted assistance and design seminar lessons around particular areas of need when kept apprised of student performance in college courses.

Implications

Ensuring that high school students become college and career ready is an ever-present education policy concern. This study describes ways that MC-ECs provide an additional support for college course-taking students. Findings show that although seminar is structured in varied ways, students and practitioners alike perceive a positive impact.

Further study into seminar may uncover direct links between specific features of seminar and student outcomes. Studying the structure and effects of seminar can help schools make decisions about how to best prepare students for success in college level coursework.

References

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