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External Evaluation of the Transition to Online Learning Within Hawai'i's Early College Program¹

Executive Summary

Prepared for

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Executive Summary

Background

Over the last 10 years, the Early College program in Hawai'i, which provides public school students in grades 9-12 with the opportunity to participate in "sheltered" college classes (i.e., college classes composed only of their high school peers), has become the state's most popular dual credit program. Eighteen percent of high school completers (1,964 students) from the Class of 2019 participated in Early College prior to their high school graduation.² This is particularly notable since previous studies of dual credit programs in Hawai'i — including Early College — found that students who participated in these programs, particularly those from groups underrepresented in higher education (defined as economically disadvantaged, Native Hawaiian, and/or Pacific Islander students in Hawai'i), were more likely to enroll, persist, and graduate from college than their peers who did not participate in dual credit programs.³

Study Purpose and Methods

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the vast majority of Early College classes occurred at students' high school campuses in an effort to eliminate transportation barriers for students and provide dual credit opportunities during the school day. However, during the Spring 2020 term, the COVID-19 pandemic required educational activities at both high school and college campuses to quickly shift online. Surveys of Early College students conducted by the Hawai'i State Department of Education (HIDOE) and Hawai'i P-20 Partnerships for Education (Hawai'i P-20) during the Spring 2020 and Fall 2020 terms, and anecdotal evidence from Early College practitioners in Hawai'i, indicated that there were challenges associated with transitioning Early College classes online and that additional work was needed to improve high school student readiness for online college classes, student engagement in these courses, and academic and nonacademic support services for participating students.

To further study the challenges encountered, lessons learned, and considerations for future offerings for online Early College courses, Hawai'i P-20 contracted with RTI International (RTI) on a short-term evaluation beginning in Spring 2021. This external evaluation examined the effect of the transition to online course offerings on Hawai'i's Early College program. It had four aims:

- Identify the challenges associated with the transition of all Early College classes online and the impact of this transition on student participation and success in Early College classes.

² Hawai'i Data eXchange Partnership (n.d.) College & Career Readiness Indicators Report (CCRI). Accessed from <https://www.hawaiidxp.org/ccri-reports/>

³ Hawai'i P-20 Partnerships for Education (2020).

- Determine the kinds of solutions that were developed to meet these challenges.
- Highlight key lessons learned related to online Early College courses.
- Make recommendations for offering online Early College courses and enhancing student access to these courses.

To address these aims, RTI conducted a multimethod analysis using student data for Early College participants provided by the Hawai'i Data eXchange Partnership (DXP). These data tracked Early College participation and outcomes from Summer 2018 through Spring 2021 and permitted conducting analyses of Early College enrollment and course success by sex, race/ethnicity, economic status, academic grade level, school type (e.g., HIDOE/Charter designation, Title I status, and locale), and course subject area to determine the impact of the transition to online Early College course offerings on each of these variables.

Additionally, RTI obtained modality data to examine both the enrollment in different course modalities and the success of students taking courses in different modalities. To solicit information about the perceptions of the transition to online learning, in January and February 2022, RTI conducted online surveys of University of Hawai'i (UH) Early College instructors and high school Early College coordinators and led focus groups of UH and HIDOE Early College coordinators, which included questions about the challenges they encountered, the lessons they learned, and their thoughts about best practices to enhance online instruction. Additionally, findings from student surveys conducted by HIDOE and Hawai'i P-20 in Spring 2020 and Fall 2020 highlight their perceptions of the transition to online learning.

Challenges Associated with the Transition to Online Learning

In surveys and focus groups, high school staff, UH faculty and staff, and Early College students reported their experiences of challenges during the mandated, sudden transition to online learning for Early College courses during Spring 2020.

- High school staff had to help students learn how to access and use the learning management platform and software, but they themselves needed support in shifting to online learning.
- UH instructors needed to develop instructional approaches to ensure that the quality of instruction and student interactions remained consistent to pre-pandemic practices.
- Students missed getting real-time responses from their instructors and interacting with their peers. Additionally, some had family obligations, which made learning remotely more difficult.

Examining educational administrative data about student enrollment and success showed challenges faced by Early College high school staff, UH coordinators, and students.

- Analyses showed a decline in Early College course offerings and enrollment from Spring 2020 to Fall 2020. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, course offerings and

enrollment had been increasing, which suggested that the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and transition to online learning did pose some early limitations. However, for most groups, Early College enrollment numbers in Spring 2021 were higher than they had been in Spring 2019.

- In particular, male students suffered more from the rapid switch to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic than females. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, males enrolled less frequently than females. From Spring 2020 to Fall 2020, male enrollment declined more than female enrollment, and from Fall 2020 to Spring 2021, the male enrollment rate of recovery was less than the female enrollment rate of recovery. However, although males' Spring 2021 enrollment number was lower than it had been in Spring 2020, it was about the same as it had been in Spring 2019.
- Regarding course success, measured by earning a letter grade of "C" or better for the purposes of this report, most groups of students did not experience a statistically significant decline in their Early College success rates from Spring 2019 to Spring 2020, with the exception of males and 9th graders; however, both groups had statistically significant positive increases from Spring 2020 to Spring 2021. For males and 9th grade students, the rate of earning a "C" or better was higher in Spring 2021 than it had been in Spring 2019.
- Rural schools had a statistically significant decline in success rate from Spring 2019 to Spring 2020, but they did not have a statistically significant recovery from Spring 2020 to Spring 2021.
- Early College students enrolled in science courses experienced the steepest decline in their success rate during Spring 2020. Only 73% of them earned a "C" or better; however, by Fall 2020, 86% of Early College students enrolled in science courses earned a "C" or better.

Solutions Developed to Address the Challenges Associated with the Transition to Online Learning

Many Early College students, instructors, and staff were willing to adapt to an online format, and they became more comfortable with it over time.

- In focus groups, participants noted that the online format meant that UH instructors did not have to travel to different high schools to teach Early College courses. In the past, the vast majority of Early College courses were offered in a face-to-face format, which required UH instructors to travel to individual high schools to teach. With online learning, students from different schools could register for and participate in these courses.
- In the survey, UH instructors indicated that they increased collaboration efforts with high school Early College coordinators as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. UH faculty indicated they alerted the high school Early College coordinator about problematic attendance or low grades during the COVID-19 pandemic at a higher percentage than they did before the pandemic.
- High school Early College coordinators noted that they could expand their reach to more students with online learning.

- In Fall 2020, about two-thirds of Early College student survey respondents reported that, based on their experiences with online Early College courses, they would be interested in taking additional online Early College courses.

An examination of the administrative data reflects the willingness for all parties involved with Early College to adapt teaching and learning in an online setting.

- By Spring 2021, Early College course offerings not only rebounded, but also increased from Spring 2019 (198 courses in Spring 2021 compared with 187 courses in Spring 2019).
- In each term, even during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in Spring 2020, on average, 87% of students earned a grade of "C" or better in their Early College courses.
- This rate of success (i.e., 87% or higher) held in both synchronous and asynchronous courses in Fall 2020 and Spring 2021.
- Many groups that had experienced a decline in enrollment had recovered to some extent by Spring 2021. For example, Native Hawaiian and Filipino students' rates declined from Spring 2020 to Fall 2020 and increased from Fall 2020 to Spring 2021. In Spring 2021, their enrollment numbers were about the same or higher than they had been in Fall 2019. Similarly, 10th and 11th grade students' enrollment declined from Spring 2020 to Fall 2020 and increased from Fall 2020 to Spring 2021 and were the same or higher than they had been in Fall 2019.
- Although many groups experienced a slight decline in course success when the COVID-19 pandemic began, few differences were statistically significant. From Spring 2019 to Spring 2020, the decrease in the percentage of students earning a "C" or better was not statistically significant for any group except males and 9th graders.

Considerations for Continuing to Offer Online Early College Courses

Many Early College students, instructors, and staff expressed an interest in continuing to offer online Early College classes. They noted some considerations for doing so:

- During the COVID-19 pandemic, some courses were shared across schools to optimize enrollment and provide equity of access. If the administrative challenges to this approach (e.g., Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act [FERPA], Title IX, general oversight) could be managed or streamlined, having shared courses could lead to long-lasting economies of scale that have the potential to connect more students to more courses across the state. To best support students, it is also important that these courses are intentionally selected to ensure they will help students further their progress to a degree.
- UH and HIDOE Early College coordinators should collaborate to specify the skills that students need to succeed as online learners in synchronous and asynchronous Early College classes. Some students may be less prepared than others for online learning. Early College coordinators and/or instructors could develop a self-assessment to screen for prepared online learners. Then, they could devise strategies to assist unprepared students to ready themselves for online instruction. Many collegiate and professional learning opportunities continue to be provided in an online format; it is to students' advantage to gain these skills early.

- Both synchronous and asynchronous online Early College classes should continue to be offered. In the survey administered by RTI, about half of UH instructors (48%) reported that synchronous course delivery was more effective than asynchronous course delivery. Synchronous classes were more like in-person courses with set times to engage with the coursework, instructor, and other students. Yet, the rate of students earning a “C” or better is about the same in synchronous and asynchronous courses, and some students benefited from the flexibility that asynchronous instruction allowed.

Considerations for Enhancing Student Access to Online Early College Courses

- Strong communication practices between high school Early College coordinators, UH Early College coordinators, and UH instructors should be sustained to help all parties work more effectively for students. Ongoing efforts to unify staff in services to students’ success will continually enhance the benefits students receive.
- Students should have a clear person to contact at the high school to help them address online learning as well as general questions/issues. Particularly in an online environment, students may need more assistance creating their schedule, connecting to faculty, and seeking help when they encounter difficulties in class. It is important for students to understand the different roles and responsibilities of their high school Early College coordinator, their UH Early College coordinator, and their instructors.
- In-person support should be offered to those who need it. Students in online courses may benefit from having an established time and place to connect with other students and get assistance from staff. This support may have a particular benefit for those in asynchronous courses. Either the high school or the college could provide this in-person support based on which institution has the greatest capacity to do so.