

## Higher Education

# Early-college programs rethink high expectations

by SARAH BUTRYMOWICZ

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It was Michael Rosa's third day of Spanish at [Hostos Community College](#) in New York City, even though he was just

14. Rosa got into a shouting match with his professor. It happened so often in those days that

he doesn't remember what this particular fight was about – only that he refused to leave the classroom. Security guards came and escorted him across the bridge back to his high school, [Hostos-Lincoln Academy](#).

Under pressure, faculty re-enrolled him in another college Spanish course.

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Rosa, a rising senior who now talks about his past immaturity with a smile and a shake of the head, began college courses in ninth grade through the [Early College High School Initiative](#). The program, funded by the [Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation](#), was created with the



*9<sup>th</sup> grade  
Immaturity*

ambitious goal of getting at-risk students an associate's degree or an equivalent amount of transferable credit by the end of high school.

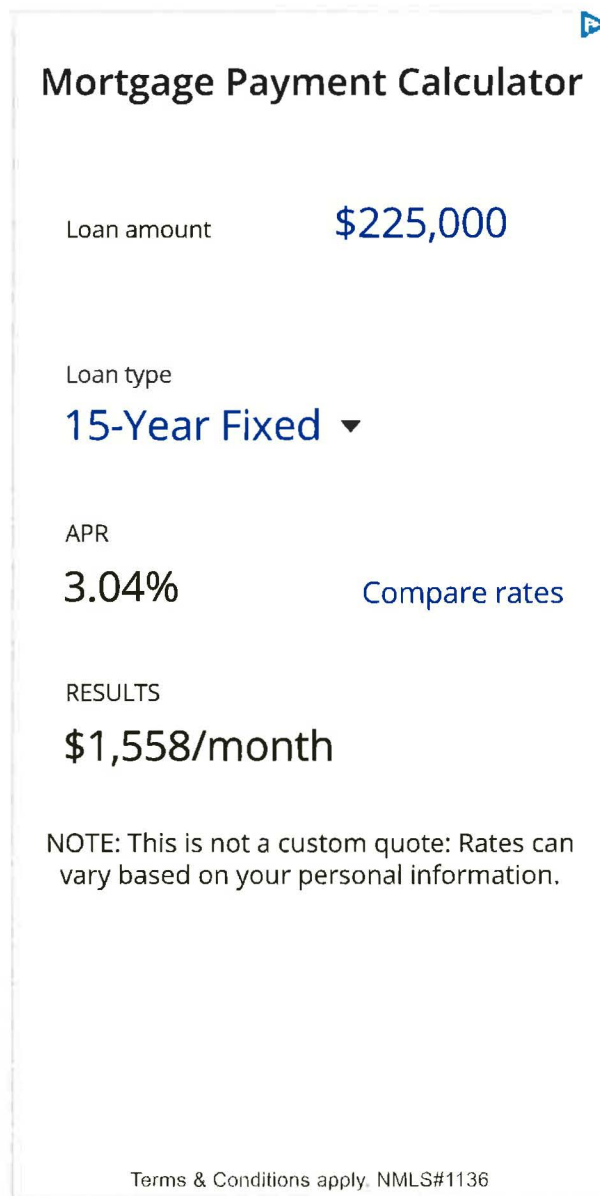
"We aim really high," said Michael Webb, the initiative's director.

"We want schools to hold these lofty goals in place. We realize they may fall short."

### **A grand strategy**

When the program started at Hostos-Lincoln in 2007, it didn't seem like getting off the carefully plotted track was an option. "There was pressure," said Daniel Jackson, a guidance counselor. When dealing with troubled students, he often felt, "I can't take you out, you're going to fall behind." As it was, in order to make it to the 60 credits needed for an associate's degree while still completing high school requirements, many students had to take college classes over the summer.

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The original mandate of getting all students through to an associate's degree reflects a popular belief in education-reform circles that high expectations will motivate students and lead to success. These thoughts have fueled legislation geared toward increasing standards, like [No Child Left Behind](#), and spurred movements like the development of “no-excuses” charter schools.

But with high expectations come stumbling blocks. One important lesson that early-college programs have learned is that some students who are short on basic skills or maturity simply aren't ready for college courses.

Hostos, a 550-student middle and high school, is already a success story in New York City's South Bronx. The school – whose students are 99 percent minority, with two-thirds living at or below the poverty line – graduates about 90 percent of its students in four years, and nearly the same percentage go to college. That's well above graduation rates that are closer to 50 percent in the rest of the South Bronx, where most of the students live.

But even in such a successful school, getting 100 percent of students to accumulate 60 college credits proved impossible. Hostos is now working toward more achievable goals revolving around college preparation. This evolution serves as a window into both the challenges and accomplishments of the national early-college program, which has softened its original goal of requiring all students to earn two years of transferable college credit. Now, an associate's degree is optional.

Since 2002, the Early College High School Initiative has opened over 200 schools, with the two largest concentrations in North Carolina (61 schools) and California (38 schools). The program will soon expand to 250 schools nationwide.

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### The need for 'early colleges'

Some students enter high school well below grade level, said Kathy Moran, a research associate at the [Middle College National Consortium](#), which is comprised of small high schools located on college campuses, including 19 early-college schools. "If you expect youngsters to graduate in four years with 60 transferable credits, that's probably a stretch," she said. "It's realistic for everybody to essentially get one year of college under their belt."

entering as  
a junior or senior  
to Dual Enrollment

Finding a way to get at-risk students to and through college has become one of the ultimate education puzzles. In the 1970s, “middle colleges” were started to address the higher-education enrollment disparities between white and minority students. At-risk students went to their small high schools on college campuses, which provided students with support structures and allowed them to take college classes if they wanted to.

In the early 2000s, the Early College High School Initiative took all of these features and expanded upon them, setting up a clear track to a definitive goal: an associate’s degree. By 2009, the program boasted an 85 percent graduation rate nationwide, with 65 percent of its students accepted to four-year colleges.

Many early colleges have also succeeded in creating a college-going atmosphere. Even for the students who aren’t earning an associate’s degree, there’s still a good chance they’re completing college-prep courses. Preliminary results from a study by the SERVE Center at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro show that nearly 83 percent of early-college ninth-graders were enrolled in at least one college-prep math course, compared to 67.3 percent of their peers.

### **Redefining success**

Still, only about 11 percent of early-college graduates nationwide received associate’s degrees, far below the original goal of 100 percent. And the average early-college student graduates with just 22 credits, less than a year’s worth of college coursework.

While the philosophy at Hostos has shifted, the original mandate still has influence. About a third of the 90 rising-seniors – the first class to go through this program – expect to receive associate’s degrees. Another third will fall short of that goal but graduate with a significant amount of college credit.

Some at Hostos feel the high percentage of students receiving associate's degrees in the early years may have come at the cost of a trial-and-error system that pushed students into and through college courses they weren't ready to take. Some became overwhelmed by the pressure. Others, like Rosa, butted heads with professors.

Hostos learned that while many students rise to high expectations, others simply don't. Some needed constant prodding to turn in assignments on time. They may have lacked maturity and felt uncomfortable approaching a professor with questions.

The program still aims to teach high-schoolers how to operate in college, primarily through weekly advisory seminars covering basics like taking notes during a lecture and following along with assignments in the syllabus. In the past, students took this course at the same time as their first college course and had to figure out differences between college and high school on their own.

High school teachers typically know when to push kids and when to let up. They see the students every day, not twice a week like college professors. They mix in a little parenting with teaching, offering advice, encouragement and sometimes even food, trying to fill multiple gaps in students' lives, not just in their education.

David Johnson, the early-college liaison between Hostos-Lincoln Academy and the community college, said the program doesn't give its college professors any formal training in working with high-schoolers. They are told to give the high school students a college experience – and not just teach them college material in a high-school setting.

### **Taking a new approach**

Last year, administrators at Hostos shifted their focus to college preparation, working from the idea that any college credit earned would spur success. All ninth-graders are still enrolled in college

courses, but they no longer have to stay on the track if it doesn't work for them. The emphasis is on making sure they get that associate's degree eventually, if not within two years.

Jackson, the guidance counselor, says he has long known that not all kids are ready for college courses by age 14, and he's searching for a way to better predict who can succeed. Starting this school year, all ninth-graders will take an extended seminar in the fall. If they prove during this time that they're mature enough to take a college course, they'll be enrolled in the spring.

Hostos will also create an eighth-grade elective for its middle school, taught partially by high school teachers, that will emphasize writing skills and cultural literacy.

Hostos found out through trial and error what practices work best for its students, in part because the Early College High School Initiative doesn't have any formal guidelines for preparing students for college classes.

The program does suggest strategies, though, such as prep sessions for students who come in below grade level, said Joel Vargas, program director at [Jobs for the Future](#), the nonprofit organization that runs the initiative.

"The point of this is not to put students who are not ready for college level work and dump them into college classes," Vargas said. "They have to be ready."

It's precisely the lesson Hostos – and Michael Rosa – learned. It took him a few classes and some poor grades, but Rosa now knows how to operate in a college course. Working hard to make up for earlier mistakes, he has improved his grades and remains hopeful about earning his associate's degree and transferring to a four-year college.

Without the Early College High School Initiative, he said, “I don’t know what I’d be doing.” Instead of going to college, “I’d be confused and pissed off.”

*A version of this story appeared [here](#) on August 13, 2010 in GOOD, “a collaboration of individuals, businesses, and nonprofits pushing the world forward.”*

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