

College and Career Readiness School Models: What Works According to Students?



About This Project

In 2023, the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) launched a study to evaluate the implementation of College and Career Readiness School Models (CCRSM) in Texas. The study seeks to understand the fidelity of implementation of the CCRSM blueprints for Early College High School (ECHS) and Pathways in Technology Early College High School (P-TECH) campuses. Through the analysis of extant data, as well as the collection and analysis of focus group and interview data, researchers at AIR learned how campus leaders implemented CCRSM blueprints.

About This Brief

This research brief, part of a series of four briefs, focuses on the perspectives of high school students who successfully graduated from ECHS and P-TECH high schools in Texas. Other briefs in the series cover implementation successes and challenges as perceived by program staff, quantitative analysis of program access, and the performance of select CCRSM programs in meeting outcome-based measures. By contrast, this brief contributes by documenting experiences primarily from ECHS graduates, detailing factors they believe influenced their postsecondary success.

Key Findings

- Students felt the ECHS and P-TECH staff at the high school, including teachers and counselors, were supportive and stood out as some of the most helpful parts of their experience.
- Students felt that ECHS and P-TECH programs provided them with the knowledge and skills to persist in the degree plan that they entered during high school with the partnering college.
- However, students felt that continuity planning skills should be included in ECHS and P-TECH programs, so students can independently navigate their own custom path through college and transfer to other institutions after graduating from high school.

Methods

Respondents for this study were high school graduates of ECHS programs ($n = 53$) or P-TECH programs ($n = 2$). The 53 ECHS respondents were originally interviewed across 20 ECHS focus groups in summer 2023, shortly after they graduated from high school. Of these 53 graduates, a subset of 10 were interviewed again nearly 9 months later in one-on-one follow-up interviews. This follow-up data collection was conducted in winter 2024 to understand whether any graduates' experiences in navigating college and careers changed over time, and whether those included decisions regarding

financing further college coursework or transferring credits between degree programs or institutions of higher education (IHEs). In addition, we interviewed two P-TECH graduates in winter 2024.¹

Findings are reported for the entire sample of 55 unique respondents in the sections that follow.² Given the lack of substantive differences between ECHS and P-TECH graduates and the low number of P-TECH graduates, the findings represent experiences from across these two groups unless noted.

Findings and Discussion

ECHS and P-TECH programs enroll students in associate degree programs offered jointly with partnering institutions, which may be 4-year or 2-year IHEs. Although students in programs with 4-year IHE partners typically do not need to transfer for their bachelor's degree, those partnered with 2-year IHEs must eventually transfer to earn their bachelor's. Regardless of transfer needs, students agreed on the beneficial aspects of the CCRSM program for their postsecondary success. However, perspectives diverged on the barriers they encountered, with variations related to the type of partnering institution. We explore these differences in the following sections, detailing both the most helpful and least helpful aspects of the CCRSM experience and whether they varied based on the IHE partners of students' CCRSM programs.

What parts of the CCRSM experience did students say helped them the most?

Overall, students generally told us that programs met or exceeded their expectations, and many found the program easier than expected. Specifically, students valued the **supportive high school environment**, which they felt was central to their CCRSM experience, as well as the opportunity to acquire **knowledge** and **skills** for college success through their CCRSM program that they later used to navigate college.

Supportive High School Environment: The Role of Supportive High School Staff

Students in the CCRSM program felt highly supported during their high school years. They praised the dedication of high school staff, including instructors, counselors, AVID teachers, and college tutors, for their role in students' persistence and success. Students felt the program provided personalized guidance and support, with consistent counseling and comprehensive college planning classes that covered standardized test preparation and, at times, career counseling. Students felt that teachers empathized with their experiences, were flexible, and empowered students with academic supports, such as office hours and tutorials, allowing students to gain necessary knowledge and skills for postgraduation endeavors.

¹ P-TECH programs have been in existence a shorter amount of time than ECHS and therefore had fewer graduates in the pool of possible interviewees.

² A key limitation of our sample is that all respondents successfully graduated from either an ECHS or P-TECH program. Therefore, we do not have information from students who may have entered but did not successfully complete either program.

Students also generally felt empowered by the academic supports available to them at the high school. They were comfortable approaching teachers during office hours and felt welcome to attend tutorials, which improved their academic performance. These supports enabled both P-TECH and ECHS students to complete their major's core coursework, such as biology and chemistry, at the high school rather than at the 4-year institution, which felt like a safer environment to fail. These dynamics, as well as the smaller class sizes in college courses at the high school, allowed for more individualized instruction, which allowed students to develop the knowledge and skills they would later rely on after graduating from the CCRSM program.

College Readiness: Knowledge and Skills for College Success

Students highlighted that their CCRSM programs not only fostered a supportive environment but also equipped them with the college readiness skills and content knowledge crucial for postsecondary success. Exposure to college-level coursework and expectations helped students acclimate to the academic rigor of college, allowing them to develop essential time management and study skills. These skills were often directly instructed through curricula, including AVID and college readiness classes, which also assisted with nonacademic tasks, such as completing administrative forms and financial aid applications. Students also emphasized how they grew personally from taking college courses in high school as instructors treated them like adults, which helped them mature and reinforced accountability for their progress and success in college.

In addition, students felt academically prepared for postsecondary opportunities, citing specific content knowledge they learned in their coursework, such as software training and Microsoft certification classes. Beyond academic readiness, however, ECHS students also said they gained valuable soft skills. Attending classes in-person at the IHE allowed them to collaborate with diverse individuals and navigate a college campus, fostering resourcefulness, independence, and assertiveness. They learned time management skills between classes and recognized differences in communication norms between high school and college, appreciating this early exposure. Students emphasized the importance of self-advocacy in their postsecondary success, particularly when requiring prompt action from administrators or instructors for various scholarship applications or course grade documentation. When asked about which skills they learned through involvement in CCRSM programs were most valuable, one student shared:

That would be self-advocating, like learning to speak up for myself, and learning to work with others. The teachers there at [high school] really helped me feel comfortable in my environment, so I felt comfortable enough to talk to them, and feel comfortable to ask like, "Hey, I need help with something. Can you help me with this...?"

Another skill that students acquired was a strong level of comfort with technology, particularly with popular Learning Management Systems, such as Blackboard and Canvas. They noticed that unlike some

of their non-ECHS peers, they were able to hit the ground running in their first semester of college after high school, easily finding what they needed online and uploading assignments. In their view, these practical skills eased the transition of their studies between high school and college. One student captured how the program prepared them for college in their focus group:

When these schools are sold to you, you think about how much money you're going to save. You think about how you're going to learn so much at college from these classes, because they're college level classes. About how they're going to be so rigorous and this and that. But I think it's the stuff that's in between, that's where I grew the most. Where I had to manage my time better because I was given so much coursework. Where I had to make sure that I knew the fastest way to get to class. I had to make sure that these things that I do now, without even thinking about it, I had to learn them. I had to learn to join Zoom meetings five minutes before just in case something happens. How to talk to professors, how to email them, how to talk to advisors, how to do all these millions of things.

What did students say were the least helpful parts of CCRSM?

Despite the positive experiences that students shared, students also spoke about parts of their CCRSM experiences that they felt could be improved.

When we initially spoke with students in summer 2023, the parts of the program that they said were least supportive of their overall postsecondary success typically concerned the tasks they had to complete at the IHE after graduating from high school. At that time, students were faced with these tasks without supportive high school staff at their disposal, and they found routine matriculation procedures daunting. These included selecting courses for their specific degree plans, navigating the registration system, and communicating with instructors and other IHE personnel, such as counselors or support staff. When we followed up with students in winter 2024, however, they had more detailed observations about what they perceived to be the least helpful parts of the CCRSM program. Generally, students wished that their CCRSM programs had helped them develop the continuity skills they needed to navigate the nonacademic aspects of higher education after graduating from high school. We present these findings from the winter 2024 follow-up interviews as well as how they varied with the need to transfer between IHEs.

After high school graduation, some students continued studying at the same college where they started coursework during their CCRSM program, but others transferred to new institutions either because their partnering institution did not offer bachelor's degrees or because students' interests changed. Regardless of their need to transfer, students felt their CCRSM program could be improved and shared suggestions. In follow-up interviews, they highlighted a perceived **lack of career exploration** and **degree alignment issues**. Differences between transfer and nontransfer students centered on credit advising, revealing costly implications for transfer students.

Behind on Career Exploration and Readiness

Students believed their ECHS programs helped with early decisions in college planning, such as selecting initial courses, but they felt differently about career planning. Both transfer and nontransfer students felt that they lagged behind their peers in career planning, professional experience, and networking skills.

Students entering 4-year institutions as juniors due to the credits they earned at their ECHS felt that they lacked readiness for career and internship discussions with employers or college staff, hindering their preparation for the workforce or advanced degree programs postgraduation. College credits that students accumulated during high school limited their time at the 4-year institution, with many students realizing they had only 2 years or less remaining after high school graduation. This left them concerned about insufficient time on campus to build a competitive resume for their postsecondary goals. They perceived themselves at a disadvantage compared with traditional college students who had an additional 2 years for activities such as undergraduate research, networking with professors, obtaining internships, and campus involvement. One student explained how being ahead on coursework made them feel they had missed out in other areas:

Also, a lot of people in my class are already older. They're maybe 20, so they already have a lot going on for them. They're more financially stable than me and they've had the past two years to get whatever they had to do done, get into research labs or do research, or just get involved with the school. I feel like that's time that I didn't have that I've just... It's just a lot of the little things that I need that I couldn't do because I'm already ahead.

These students felt that their college experience fell short of their expectations due largely to their limited time on the college campus. In this regard, students reflected that before graduating high school, they had an image of the college experience that included opportunities to meet new people and discover new interests through relationships with friends that could turn into career opportunities. However, after graduating from high school and beginning full-time college enrollment, students' experiences challenged this image and proved it was unrealistic. Despite advanced class standing from previously completed coursework, they lacked rapport with upper-division classmates who had progressed together through lower-division coursework. Limited socialization opportunities deprived them of time to build social capital and access resources for exploring majors, studying abroad, or engaging in self-directed learning. This misalignment hindered their integration into the college community and access to diverse opportunities on campus.

Degree Alignment Issues

Students also expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of preparation regarding career alignment and major changes when transitioning between institutions, especially as their postsecondary plans and

aspirations sometimes shifted after enrolling in the ECHS program. In these cases, they found that their high school program did not adequately convey the costs, neither in time nor money, of changing their courses of study or majors after committing to one in high school. As students considered their evolving career interests, they sometimes felt stuck with accumulated credits that did not match their newer goals, which differed from those they pursued at program enrollment. As a result, many wished for clearer advising on the costs and implications of their program choices. As first-generation college students, they often learned of the opportunity costs of committing to a course of study early in high school far too late, and thus felt that high school administrators had guided them into career decisions without also communicating to them the costs of those decisions or considering students' individual aspirations. This led some to prematurely commit to specialized programs at universities, regretting the investment in credits that no longer aligned with their interests. One student explained how their course taking choices while high school impacted their college path:

My biggest issue was actually switching gears. In terms of an overall career goal, I wanted to get my start in electrical engineering, but I always had, I guess, the goal of going for a music degree, which is what I'm currently in right now at the [4-year college]. I am studying for a Bachelor of Music in Commercial Music. So, the hardest challenge for me was switching gears and seeing, How am I going to make these credits that I have work for a new degree plan? Because I was not even aware that I could take music classes at the Community College during my time in early college. If I had known, I definitely would have...

For these students, the value of the CCRSM program was diminished when they were told by administrators at their new IHE that much of the coursework they completed in high school through another IHE would not benefit them in their new degree plan. Despite completing general education requirements, they discovered that many credit hours would not contribute to their new major or career path. Because they either did not have much of a choice in selecting the college courses they completed for free during high school, or because their interests shifted after they did so, many students felt that they had lost an opportunity to explore different careers more fully when they realized they would be financially responsible for the new degree plan they wanted to pursue. However, compared with peers who did not participate in such a program, and who therefore had to pay for their college courses, the students we spoke to did nonetheless learn what they did not want to pursue in college without having had to pay for the coursework.

Lack of Credit Advising and Transition Plans

Students who needed to transfer between IHEs felt unprepared for the implications of entering a new degree program with college credits. This lack of preparation led to difficulties with class registration, credit transferability, and financial disbursements. Some students discovered they were ineligible for the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and other scholarships because they had to

maintain full-time status. This posed challenges because not only had they already completed at least 60 credit hours through their CCRSM program, but not all the remaining required courses were available every semester as they were higher-level courses. In one case, a student enrolled in a course after graduating from the ECHS program and was later informed that she would have to pay for it out of pocket as she had already completed a similar course during her CCRSM program. As a result, she risked eligibility for her scholarship and was rushed into enrolling in a new course after the start of the semester to retain her eligibility. Cases like these highlight the unintended consequences of successfully completing all the requirements of the CCRSM program, which may negatively impact future scholarship eligibility and financial assistance for tuition.

Students also faced scheduling challenges they were unprepared for, including waitlist issues and difficulty registering for courses due to lacking senior or junior class standing. This was particularly problematic for transfer students at new universities, as they often found upper-division courses full because enrollment opened earlier when they were still at their prior institution. Despite using self-advocacy skills learned in the CCRSM program to seek support, students still felt unprepared and distressed by the scheduling process.

Conclusion

CCRSM programs provide students valuable opportunities to earn associate degrees during high school, which can be especially lucrative for students who are historically underrepresented in higher education. By helping them save time and money in their college plans, these programs have significant potential to increase the likelihood that these students persist in such programs and ultimately earn 4-year degrees. In interviews with 55 CCRSM program graduates, most found their experiences surpassed initial expectations. However, they also provided areas for improvement.

Overwhelmingly, students felt academically supported during high school and thought that the college coursework they completed provided them the content knowledge and readiness skills they would later use to navigate college after graduating from high school. Central to their perceived success in the program was the supportiveness of their high school staff who helped them navigate the college-level coursework and the difficulty it added to their high school curriculum.

Although students celebrated these parts of their CCRSM experience and valued the money they saved by participating in the CCRSM program, they also discovered challenges after graduating that they thought could be improved. These included the need for improved opportunities for career exploration, issues regarding degree program alignment, and a perceived lack of credit and transition plan advising.

The experiences of students in CCRSM programs highlight the significant value these opportunities offer but also reveal potential trade-offs with other beneficial opportunities that more traditional

college students experience. These findings also suggest a need for increased knowledge and autonomy within CCRSM programs to empower students to understand the consequences of and to make decisions crucial for their postgraduation endeavors, such as course selection, scheduling, and financial planning, where possible. Future CCRSM programs could enhance student experiences by providing targeted career exploration opportunities, informing students of the various degrees and programs they can pursue to foster a sense of ownership in career planning, and ensuring informed decision making regarding educational pathways during high school.



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