

Expanding Equitable Access to Higher Education: Lessons from U.S. and Global Early College Pathways

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Abstract

Early college pathways, including dual enrollment, Advanced Placement, and International Baccalaureate programs, have gained global prominence as strategies to expand access to higher education, improve college readiness, reduce time to degree, and lower student costs. While early college pathways are widely studied, much of the existing literature focuses on participation and outcomes at the secondary school level. Less attention has been paid to how these programs are designed and implemented within higher education institutions, or to how cross-national differences in postsecondary systems shape equity and persistence outcomes. This paper conceptualizes early college pathways as a structural bridge between secondary and postsecondary education and argues that access alone is insufficient without intentional design, alignment, and student support.

Drawing on national longitudinal data from the United States, the analysis shows that participation in dual enrollment is associated with improved college persistence from the first through third year, with effects varying by rurality and socioeconomic status. These findings position persistence as a key equity indicator, revealing how early access mechanisms can produce uneven benefits under different structural conditions.

The paper then situates early college pathways within a comparative international context, examining models in Europe, Asia, and Latin America. Rather than offering an exhaustive comparison, it identifies transferable design principles related to affordability, institutional coordination, academic alignment, and student support, and concludes with policy-relevant recommendations for equitable pathway design.

Keywords: affordability, college persistence, comparative education, early college pathways, rural students