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Hawaii News

Students get head start on college

By [Susan Essoyan](#)

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Diana Castaneda was just a sophomore at Waipahu High when an administrator

suggested she take a free college course being taught by a college professor on her high school campus.

The petite teenager hesitated, intimidated at the prospect, since she was a “pretty average” student, she recalls. But then she thought about her family’s tight finances and her three little brothers.

“With my family’s situation, I really wanted to help them out,” she said. “When I heard about this, I thought it was too good to be true. ... All of that intimidation got pushed away.”

Two years later, the 17-year-old is about to graduate with 22 college credits under her belt. She is shooting to become an astronomer and has already co-authored a scientific article in the Journal of Double Star Observations with classmates and her professor, Kakkala Mohanan of Leeward Community College.

Early College, a national initiative, reflects a seismic shift in expectations for its target group: students who might not make it to higher education because their parents have low incomes or did not attend college themselves.

The program offers more than free college credits, advocates say. It changes mindsets and life trajectories.

“All of a sudden they realize — I can do this!” said Waipahu High’s dynamic principal, Keith Hayashi, who pioneered the program on his campus in 2012. “It’s not something that’s foreign.”

Some Early College kids at Waipahu — nicknamed the Olympians — are even setting their sights on earning an associate's degree by the time they graduate from high school. That's an astonishing prospect for kids who might not have considered college at all.

Working with colleges

The partnership between public high schools and University of Hawaii colleges brings professors onto high school campuses to teach after the regular school day or during summers. Students earn "dual credit" that counts toward their high school diploma and a future college degree, taking courses such as Speech 151, Calculus 205, Religion 151 and Microbiology 130.

Statewide, 10 percent of the class of 2015 had earned Early College credits, up from 6 percent two years earlier, according to the latest College and Career Readiness Indicator report issued last month by Hawaii P-20 Partnerships for Education.

Waipahu High led the way, with 32 percent of its 2015 graduating seniors earning dual credits, up from 13 percent two years earlier. And that's not counting nearly as many students in Advanced Placement courses, college-level classes that traditionally attract the top high school students.

"Early College is not in competition with Advance Placement courses," said Alex Harris, senior program officer for the Harold K.L. Castle Foundation. "This is a separate strategy for a different population of students, thinking of them as collegiate material and then wrapping the support around them."

Waipahu expanded its program in 2013 with a \$250,000 grant from the McInerney Foundation. In 2014, inspired by Waipahu's success, Castle Foundation gave a \$1.2 million grant to Hawaii P-20 for Early College programs at 12 public high schools statewide. GEAR UP Hawaii, a federal grant, also provides funding.

Farrington and Kailua high schools have more than tripled their enrollment in Early College in the past two years.

"What we've seen is that once given the opportunity, these students are really taking advantage of it," Harris said. "I've been blown away by the passing rate and the percentage of students getting an A."

Karen Lee, executive director of Hawaii P-20, said demand for Early College has taken off statewide and about half of Hawaii's public high schools now offer at least one course, some more than a dozen options.

"We've been very pleased at how this particular initiative has exploded across the state," Lee said Friday. "The high schools and their local UH campuses have really been driving this on their own."

"We have more schools coming to us saying, 'Do you have any more funding?'" she added. "They really see it is changing the culture at their school. Students are excited to go to college — the possibility is real to them."

The number of public school graduates in Hawaii who enroll in college has climbed to 56 percent from 50 percent five years ago. More students are taking AP courses and

tests to gain college credit, reaching 30 percent statewide for the Class of 2015, up from 21 percent in the Class of 2011.

“Much as this is an academic exercise, it’s a change in mindset, helping our kids to believe that they will succeed if they pursue their dreams for college,” Deputy Superintendent Stephen Schatz said. “One of the most exciting things is that we are seeing more of our students go to college and, at the same time, fewer of our students are requiring remediation when they get to college.”

Critical to society

Mark Silliman, director of Early College at Waipahu, sees the program as a means to help level a social landscape that loses too many young people from the path to postsecondary education.

“When we look in our community, we have lots of pockets of poverty and we see all kinds of social ills, ranging from domestic violence, incarceration, crime, substance abuse, prostitution, the list goes on and on,” Silliman said. “All of these things we know from years of research are linked to whether or not individuals have access to higher education.

“We can’t just walk away,” he said. “We need to find the vehicles and the tools to address these problems.”

Silliman, a former chancellor at Leeward Community College, shifted gears to work with Hayashi and intervene with younger teens, and finds it “immensely rewarding.”

“I see the change in the culture of the high school here, a transformation,” said the lanky educator. “And I believe right down to the soles of my feet that this is gradually going to take root and take hold in our community, too.”

Trying out college courses in high school is not a new concept. Running Start allows motivated high school students to attend courses at community college while still in high school, paying regular tuition. But the logistics can be daunting, whether meshing schedules, getting to college, paying for classes or studying alongside grownups.

“Waipahu is right next to Leeward Community College,” Hayashi said. “Our Running Start numbers were pretty low, about eight to 12 students. ... So Dr. Silliman said, if the kids aren’t going to go there, let’s bring the college here.”

This academic year, nearly 500 students are taking Early College courses on the Waipahu campus, including the summer session.

Gabrielle Dang, 17, did her senior project on the effects of Early College and discovered that it helped build “grit” in students. “We know that grit induces academic success and influences students to work a lot harder,” she said.

Fellow senior Sharie Anne Mamuad is a prime example. She managed to juggle Early College classes, cross country and track, and a demanding science project with classmate Joshua Udasco that garnered a NASA Earth Science System Award.

“Basically Early College just gave me enough confidence to not worry about where you are now but to look beyond that,” Mamuad said, “and look at where you could be and

your potential to succeed.”