

GOING TO COLLEGE ... IN THE NINTH GRADE

Access to college classes when students are ready is a hallmark of P-TECH 9-14 schools. At Norwalk Early College Academy (NECA), what started as a course scheduling challenge has become a significant opportunity for students.

School: Norwalk Early College Academy (NECA) in Norwalk, Connecticut

Partners: Norwalk Public Schools, Norwalk Community College and IBM Corporation

Launch: September 2014

Standout Fact: The first P-TECH 9-14 model school in Connecticut

CHALLENGE

NECA's partners – Norwalk Public Schools, Norwalk Community College and IBM – understood that graduating all students with an associate in applied science degree (AAS) within six years would be challenging. With no testing or grading requirements, the school was welcoming students of all abilities, with some students behind grade level, some on grade level, and some accelerated.

In order to prepare students for college classes, NECA proposed a schedule where students would take two blocks of English and two blocks of math in their first year. These longer class periods would allow flexibility for remediation and acceleration, meeting the needs of students at different academic levels. However, it also prevented high-performing students from taking "honors" courses. This posed a concern for parents and students who were familiar with more traditional course offerings available at Norwalk High School, the larger school that NECA, as a school within a school, existed within.

EARLY COLLEGE AS A GREAT SUBSTITUTE

The NECA Steering Committee proposed a substitute that they felt would more than compensate for the absence of honors classes in Year One, offering students their first Norwalk Community College (NCC) course as ninth graders: Web Development and Design I. This was a perfect introduction to college; the course applied to NECA's two degree tracks – Software Engineering and Mobile Programming, had minimal prerequisites, and was relevant for students, like those at NECA, who used the web on a daily basis.

While a great idea, funding was quickly identified as a challenge. The Connecticut Board of Regents made a commitment to fund NECA college courses beginning in Year Two, but not in the first year of the six-year program.

Enter Tom Duffy, NCC's Computer Science Department Chair, Academic Advisor to each NECA scholar, and Program Coordinator for the two AAS degrees pathways. Duffy brought the proposal to the Academic Dean, who sent the proposal onto the NCC Management Council, comprised of the community college president and deans. Shortly thereafter, NCC President David Levinson made a commitment to secure funding for the course. Duffy and the NCC Management Council began working with the NCC Foundation to write a grant proposal that would fund the instructor costs and textbooks.

As a result, the First Niagara Foundation stepped in to provide a partnership grant of \$100,000 to the Norwalk Education Foundation and Norwalk Community College Foundation to support NECA, with the funding directed to enable students to access their first college class as ninth-graders.

With funding in hand, Duffy knew that not just any professor could teach this class of 14-year-olds. He assigned one of his full-time faculty to teach, who he knew could bridge the high school-college divide. According to Duffy, “Much of the greatness of this experience is going to come from our instructor, who really teaches well. At the college level you need to demonstrate expertise in the field.” Pointing out that college professors, unlike high school teachers, do not need a teaching certification, Duffy continues, “We rely on the interview process. There is no guarantee that you will find a good or great teacher. You have to find that rare instructor who has both—the expertise and the teaching ability.”

While funding was critical to enabling college to be introduced so early, the course would not have been possible without significant support and buy-in, particularly from NCC leadership. “I know that early access to college classes can be a powerful motivator for NECA students,” say Duffy. “I also know that this is a class in which students can taste early success, given the right professor and high school supports. I want to embrace the possibilities and enable them as much as possible.”

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For more information about the focus on College in the P-TECH 9-14 model, please visit ptech.org