The Gateway to College Program

MassGrad Summary Brief

February 2016

**Introduction**

This brief provides an overview of the promising practices and lessons learned from implementation of the Gateway to College (GtC) program in three Massachusetts sites that received planning and implementation funds through the MassGrad initiative. The program enrolls youth between the ages of 16 and 21 who have dropped out of high school or who are at very high risk of dropping out based on indicators such as attendance or credit accumulation. GtC is an early college model offered at community colleges that combines targeted supports with academic courses to allow students to complete their high school diploma while earning college credit toward a postsecondary credential.

Funded by the U.S. Department of Education and implemented by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE), MassGrad’s primary goal was “to substantially increase the number of students who earn a high school diploma.” MassGrad targeted the 133 schools from 76 districts that exceeded the statewide annual dropout rate of 2.9 percent during the 2008–09 school year. In order to receive funds, GtC programs had to partner with at least one of the MassGrad districts.

Through a competitive proposal process, ESE awarded three years of funding to Bristol Community College (BCC), Quinsigamond Community College (QCC), and Springfield Technical Community College (STCC). Each award supported a planning year followed by two years of serving students, although BCC only needed one planning semester and then enrolled five semesters of students. BCC began enrolling students in January 2012 in partnership with the Fall River Public Schools, QCC began in September 2012 with the Worcester Public Schools, and STCC began in September 2013 with the Springfield Public Schools. The awards also enabled the Gateway to College National Network (GtCNN) to provide technical assistance for three years.

### Overview of the Gateway to College National Model

The GtC program began in 2000 in Oregon and has expanded to a network of 41 colleges in 21 states. Between 2004 and 2014, more than 3,000 students graduated high school while earning college credit through the GtC program. The program’s location on a community college campus may make it more desirable to students who are not succeeding in a traditional high school setting. At the same time, the college’s partnership with a public school district brings expertise and support from secondary school and district personnel.

The Gateway to College National Network (GtCNN) supports all programs in the network. As shown on the next page, the GtC model has five

“essential elements”: innovative teaching and learning, intentional collaboration, sustainable partnerships, significant dual credit, and holistic student support. GtC programs are funded by public school districts, which pay tuition for each student from their district who enrolls. The program may also receive in-kind support from the college, such as reduced tuition and fees, rent-free space in college buildings, and access to the college’s computing resources.

The staff of each GtC program includes a director, one or more resource specialists, and a data analyst or program assistant. GtC directors oversee program operations and implementation, serve as the primary contact for the college and GtCNN, and work with the college to secure course seats for GtC students. In addition, they develop strategies to recruit districts, recruit and enroll students, and manage the resource specialists’ implementation of these processes. Directors have less interaction with students than resource specialists do, but they get involved with major student challenges, such as those that may warrant dismissal from the program.

Resource specialists are the day-to-day point of contact for students, faculty, and guidance counselors from students’ sending high schools. They provide wraparound support and resources for students navigating barriers to successful program completion, such as family

responsibilities or lack of transportation or childcare. They share strategies with students regarding good study habits and setting priorities, and at some sites they teach a required college skills course. Some resource specialists provide tutoring in English or mathematics. They communicate often with college faculty about students’ course attendance and performance, and faculty are encouraged to contact the resource specialists quickly when a student is struggling with attendance or performance. This allows resource specialists to determine whether a student needs increased support.

**Gateway to College**

**Essential Elements**

**Innovative Teaching and Learning** – Encourages the implementation of innovative pedagogical techniques based on both research and proven practices in effective teaching and learning.

**Intentional Collaboration** – Integrates collaboration, continuous improvement, and professional development, with the goal of improving student success and program sustainability.

**Sustainable Partnerships** – Leverages the capacity of school districts, colleges, and other community organizations to create sustainable programs that help meet the local need for dropout recovery.

**Significant Dual Credit** – Provides a college-based dual credit program that serves eligible students who have dropped out of (or are unlikely to graduate from) high school and who simultaneously earn a high school diploma and substantial college credit.

**Holistic Student Support** – Provides wrap-around student support to meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of students in an environment that fosters the development of knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in school and in life.

Data analysts or program assistants keep track of student course enrollment, performance, and credit attainment, in addition to any data that must be reported to GtCNN or the college. They also tell partner school districts which students have completed high school course requirements through their courses at the college. When requested by GtC program directors, data analysts also develop periodic reports regarding program recruitment, enrollment, and retention.

## Recommendations for Gateway to College Program Implementation

The recommendations in this section were drawn from the MassGrad evaluation conducted by the UMass Donahue Institute. During school years 2012–13 through 2014–15, UMDI conducted onsite and phone interviews with directors, resource specialists, faculty, and school district liaisons from each GtC site; observed classroom activities; observed technical assistance events attended by all three sites; and interviewed GtCNN representatives. Promising practices and lessons learned from these sources yielded recommendations in four categories: (1) partnership and communication, (2) faculty recruitment and retention, (3) student recruitment and enrollment, and (4) student support.

### Partnership and Communication

A strong partnership between the college and the partner school district increases the commitment of both parties to the success of the program. The following recommendations inform effective partnership and communication practices.

**Form leadership teams that include both college and school district representatives.** All three colleges formed leadership teams that included school district representatives during the program planning phase. These teams were able to create student recruitment, enrollment, and retention policies; develop a shared vision for the program; and begin to develop a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the college and the school district.

**Develop a formal MOU with partner districts before starting program.**The MOU was an essential guide to aspects of program operation at each site. When problems arose regarding the respective responsibilities of the colleges and school district partners, the MOU was able to guide action steps. At two sites, not having a finalized MOU before the program began led to serious implementation challenges. Some elements of an MOU included:

* Courses that would be eligible for both high school and college credit.
* Services to be offered by the college in addition to providing courses, such as counseling, academic advising, tutoring, and accommodations for students with disabilities.
* Resources to be provided by the college, such as textbooks and supplemental materials.
* Tuition schedule and payment dates.
* Number of students that the school district would make a good faith effort to provide to the program.
* Establishment of a program advisory board and a program liaison from the school district.
* Student eligibility criteria, such as age, residence, prior high school credit accumulation, and minimum reading level.
* Mechanism for a college to report information to the district, such as student attendance and performance.

**Maintain regular communication between program and school/district staff.**One program director scheduled monthly phone meetings with representatives from the partner school district and high schools in order to discuss program policies, student concerns, and district or school issues that could affect the GtC program’s recruiting efforts, enrollment, or curriculum. Resource specialists also contacted the high school guidance counselors frequently throughout the school year to discuss recruitment, the potential for success of specific applicants, and the status of current students. Communication among the program, district, and schools has allowed these stakeholders to address issues proactively and collaboratively.

### Faculty Recruitment and Retention

Faculty recruitment, training, and retention practices varied across sites. In addition, the extent to which college faculty interacted with program staff varied among faculty members within each site. The following recommendations describe successful practices related to faculty recruitment, commitment, and student support.

**Implement opt-in processes in faculty recruitment.** For the program to succeed, professors must be willing to have GtC students in their classes and be comfortable working with them. They must also be willing to communicate frequently with resource specialists regarding students’ progress and needs. Low comfort and an unwillingness to communicate among some faculty was a barrier to successful program implementation and proactive student support. As a result, one site implemented a process for explaining the program to professors and obtaining their permission before enrolling GtC students in their courses. The site reported that this process led to the involvement of professors who were more willing to provide the additional assistance and support that GtC students need.

**Establish a professional learning community.** Creating opportunities for GtC faculty to meet regularly and participate in professional development related to their GtC work established a sense of collegiality among faculty and GtC program staff. As a result, the two groups could collaborate more effectively to meet student needs. At one site, staff and faculty participated in a week-long training, met biweekly to discuss program issues and student support strategies, and met between semesters to make program refinements. One outcome was that faculty coordinated course deadlines so major assignments and assessments were spread more evenly across the semester, an accommodation that GtC students had requested. Faculty also reported that they liked hearing from their colleagues about students’ behavior and progress in other classes, because it gave them insight into how they could work more successfully with the same students in their own classes.

### Student Recruitment and Enrollment

Some student recruitment and enrollment challenges affected all three sites, while other challenges affected just one or two sites. The following recommendations reflect lessons that sites learned by addressing these challenges.

**Partner with multiple districts to increase the applicant pool.**As each site enrolled additional students across successive cohorts, fewer target students were available to recruit, and sites were unable to recruit enough of their target students. As a result, each site either (a) accepted students who were not prepared to meet program expectations and subsequently dropped out, or (b) fell short of their enrollment capacity, which in turn reduced their per-pupil income from school districts. Two sites decided to expand the pool of potential students by partnering with additional school districts. During their final year of MassGrad funding, both of these sites actively recruited additional district partners.

**To develop new partnerships, engage with the right district representatives.** One site that was attempting to recruit new partner districts reported that superintendents were too busy to respond quickly and that contacting high school guidance departments was more successful. This site met with guidance departments in several districts to discuss the program and provide recruitment materials, such as program brochures. Interested guidance personnel then recommended the program to their school administrators, who in turn suggested the partnership to district administrators. The site believed that this strategy expedited the partnership process.

**Communicate program expectations clearly to applicants.** Each site emphasized the importance of recruiting students who could succeed, and that success required more than just meeting reading and mathematics entrance requirements. They said that students must also attend class regularly, complete assignments, seek assistance from GtC staff or their course instructors, be willing to receive support and critical feedback, make adjustments to their learning strategies when necessary, and be committed to earning college credit while completing their high school requirements. The program shared these expectations with school personnel to help them suggest students who would be likely to succeed in the program. They also communicated these expectations to students during the recruitment and orientation processes.

**Ask applicants to demonstrate commitment and accountability.** As each site enrolled subsequent cohorts of students, they refined their enrollment processes. At one site, students had to demonstrate through an interview and a written application that they wanted to be in the program and would make school their top priority. During the interview process, a parent or guardian was also required to meet with GtC staff and pledge their commitment to supporting the student’s success in the program. Once enrolled, students participated in a two-day mandatory orientation and signed a student agreement. Students who deviated from the agreement were required to create a “success contract” with a resource specialist who monitored this contract closely in order to provide more timely interventions should the student fall behind.

### Student Support

Program personnel focused their student supports on academics, but they also believe that socio-emotional support is crucial. The strategies below encompass both types of supports.

**Institute mandatory study time and tutoring.** Sites reported that students’ greatest obstacles to completing coursework were inadequate skills in time management and setting priorities, lack of quiet study space at home, and a need for more intensive one-on-one instruction. One site implemented a mandatory weekly study hall to create time for students to work independently or receive support from resource specialists and tutors. Students at a second site were encouraged to complete their homework in the GtC program office if they needed a quiet space. This site also required students who were in danger of failing a course to utilize the college’s tutoring resources. At the third site, resource specialists often provided tutoring to struggling students or referred them to the college’s tutoring center for assistance.

**Implement policies and procedures to improve attendance.** Frequent absences were a major barrier to student success. Each site implemented communication policies and systems to monitor students’ attendance proactively. All students were required to check in with the resource specialists before class daily at one site and weekly at the other two sites. Student attendance information was sent to the teaching faculty, who were asked to notify the resource specialists of any absences that were not documented in the attendance report. In addition, students were expected to notify their professors and the resource specialists prior to a known absence. When students did not provide notification, program staff contacted them to check in and remind them of the attendance policy. One site reported that after these protocols were implemented, no student exceeded the maximum of six allowed absences without first having communicated with a resource specialist on multiple occasions.

**Maximize limited resources for student support.** As programs grew, their staff-to-student ratios declined, and they needed to develop additional strategies for providing student support. Two sites developed the leadership skills of students who had already completed a semester of the program by utilizing them as peer mentors for first-semester students. One site decided to provide the most intensive support to first-semester students, which in turn required second- and third-semester students to become more independent. This was a difficult decision because it reduced the resource specialists’ availability to students with whom they had developed strong and productive relationships during previous semesters.

**Implement an academic monitoring and alert system.** Resource specialists from two colleges reported that in the program’s first year they were notified of students’ poor academic performance too late in the semester to provide much support. In response to this challenge, one site developed an alert system that resulted in more timely intervention. The system assigned students to one of three levels based on their attendance and coursework completion. “Green” students were meeting attendance and coursework expectations; “yellow” students had missed one or two classes, had not completed one or two homework assignments, and/or had missed a deadline; and “red” students had exceeded one of the cutoffs for yellow status. Resource specialists checked in with “yellow” students and assessed their support needs. “Red” students received intensive support and intervention, which included additional tutoring and/or meetings with a student’s parents or guardians as needed. As a result of this system, resource specialists were able to intervene before a student’s lack of attendance and/or coursework completion resulted in automatic program dismissal.

**Develop procedures to minimize the impact of student dismissals.**During the first program year, if students were dismissed from the programs (e.g., due to inadequate academic performance), the timing often caused gaps in learning. At schools with quarterly marking periods, for example, students who were dismissed after the fall college semester ended could not re-enroll in their high school until several weeks later when the third quarter began. Two school districts asked the programs to take these timing issues into consideration, and the programs began to coordinate dismissals with the beginning of high school grading periods.

**Build community among GtC students and staff.** All three programs reported that building strong relationships and a sense of community contributed to students’ academic success. They used several strategies to accomplish this. During orientation, new students had the opportunity to form friendships with their classmates and to speak with students from previous cohorts about their experiences in the program. At all sites, first-semester students were encouraged or required to take all of their classes together. The programs also offered summer activities to keep students in the habit of coming to campus daily and connecting with their classmates. At one site, students participated in a community service project that was led by a resource specialist. Last, the programs encouraged students to get involved in the college’s sports program by trying out for a team or attending a game together.

## Student Outcomes

Across the three sites, 273 students had enrolled by the end of the 2013–14 school year. Of the students for whom identifying information was available (N=261), 61 percent were eligible for free or reduced price lunch, 7 percent were students with disabilities, and 2 percent were English language learners. In addition, 56 percent of the students were female, 54 percent were White, 25 percent were Hispanic/Latino, 16 percent were Black/African American, 3 percent were Asian, and 1 percent each were Multi-Racial Non-Hispanic, American Indian or Alaskan Native, or Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander.

Of the 273 students who enrolled in the BCC, QCC, and STCC programs between spring 2012 and spring 2014, 50 percent had completed the program or remained enrolled as of June 2014. A national average across GtC sites is not available, but GtCNN staff believed that this rate was similar to most programs in the early stages of implementation. Depending on the site, enrolled students had earned an average of 10 to 12 college credits, and students who graduated from the program had earned an average of 20 to 26 college credits. GtC students maintained an average program attendance rate of 86 percent. As of June 2015, of the 261 students who could be matched to ESE datasets, 49 percent had graduated from high school and 26 percent had dropped out of high school. Sites were not tracking their students’ post-GtC outcomes.

Four factors were assessed for GtC students to determine their relationship with dropping out of high school. The four factors, which were all assessed at the time the student entered the GtC program, were grade point average, the number of credits a student still needed to graduate from high school, and ACCUPLACER reading and mathematics exam scores. The dichotomous dependent variable was whether students had dropped out of high school versus graduating from high school or remaining enrolled in the GtC program or high school.

Both GPA and high school credit accumulation were significantly associated with the likelihood of dropping out. Specifically, students who needed more credits to graduate were more likely to drop out, and students who had higher GPAs were less likely to drop out.

Scores on the ACCUPLACER reading test were not significantly associated with the likelihood of dropping out. Scores on the ACCUPLACER mathematics exam, while not statistically significant (p<.07), showed the meaningful trend that each additional point on the exam was associated with a one percentage point reduction in the expected dropout rate. This finding suggests that higher mathematics scores may be a key predictor of success in the GtC programs. The relatively small sample size may have limited the power to detect significant differences.

According to GtC staff and students, program outcomes go beyond a high school diploma and college course credit. Outcomes also include increased competence in socio-emotional learning and professional skills, such as organization, prioritization, self-regulation, motivation, and self-confidence. Staff and students believed that the program had improved student performance on these outcomes, although they were not formally measured. Additional findings from outcome analyses will be presented in the MassGrad evaluation final report, to be posted at <http://www.doe.mass.edu/ccr/massgrad/evalReports.html> in summer 2016.

## Additional Resources

The following resources provide additional information about GtCNN and the MassGrad GtC programs.

1. The Gateway to College National Network, <http://www.gatewaytocollege.org/>.
2. Gateway to College at Bristol Community College, <http://www.bristolcc.edu/gateway/>
3. Gateway to College at Quinsigamond Community College, <http://www.qcc.edu/academics/high-school-student-programsoptions/gateway-college>.
4. Gateway to College at Springfield Technical Community College, <http://www.stcc.edu/gatewaytocollege/>.
5. MassGrad Evaluation Brief – Gateway to College 2012, <http://www.doe.mass.edu/ccr/massgrad/EvalBrief-2012Gateway.pdf>.
6. MassGrad Evaluation Brief – Gateway to College 2013, <http://www.doe.mass.edu/ccr/massgrad/EvalBrief-2013Gateway.pdf>.

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