Introduction

The MassGrad Evaluation Briefs are a series of publications written for participants in the evaluation being conducted by the UMass Donahue Institute (UMDI). The Briefs will share key findings from evaluation site visits, interviews, surveys, and reports. It is a high priority for the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) that you receive feedback from the evaluation. Your participation has been very helpful and greatly appreciated.

Gateway to College

All schools in the MassGrad cohort were eligible to apply for one of three awards providing start-up funding, technical assistance, professional development, and evaluation support during a three-year period, to create new early college high schools based on the Gateway to College (GtC) program model. The GtC model is intended to engage youth who have dropped out of high school or who are not on track to graduate, enabling them to complete their high school diploma requirements at institutions of higher education while simultaneously earning college credits toward an associate’s degree or certificate. The program is intended to support the academic, social, and emotional needs of participating students. Award amounts were up to $300,000 per school during a 3-year period.

Bristol and Quinsigamond Community Colleges (BCC and QCC) received awards in October 2011, and Springfield Technical Community College (STCC) received the final award in the spring of 2012. The BCC site opened for students in January 2012, the QCC site opened in September 2012, and STCC intends to open in September 2013.

The findings reported in this Evaluation Brief are from the site visit to BCC and interviews with BCC faculty and program staff, the QCC site directors, the ESE manager overseeing the GtC work, and a guidance counselor from one of the partner high schools. No data have been collected yet from STCC. Due to the small number of sites, UMDI informed interviewees that reporting could not be entirely confidential, and that they should inform us if they preferred for certain responses not to be reported. None of the information reported here was “off the record,” so many of the findings below are linked to a specific program site.

At the time of the site visit, the BCC site was halfway through the first semester. At the time of the phone interview, QCC was planning to enroll their first cohort in the fall of 2012. This Brief will first present findings from BCC’s and QCC’s pre-implementation phases, followed by findings from BCC’s initial months of implementation. Many best practices and challenges have been identified, and this brief will highlight the key issues identified so far.
BCC and QCC offered similar feedback in some areas. Both colleges and one partnering high school emphasized that they are framing GtC to students as an alternative opportunity. The staff at both colleges report that they are very satisfied with the training and ongoing support that they have received from the GtC National Network. Both sites also reported that their partner school districts and all departments at their host institutions of higher education (IHEs) have been helpful and supportive.

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**Planning Phase**

The BCC and QCC sites were asked to identify the successes and challenges of their planning phase, and findings are reported below.

*Leadership teams and partnerships.* Both BCC and QCC formed leadership teams of IHE and high school staff members that met weekly to plan and coordinate the implementation of the GtC program. The collaboration and communication across IHEs and partner schools was a strength of the planning work for both sites. One school explained that the GtC leadership team was working to “envision K-14 schooling” for their district. BCC felt that the strength of their partnerships had helped them to select the right first cohort of students. Similarly, the ESE interviewee expressed that one strength of the MassGrad GtC sites is that both the IHEs and partner schools have a strong voice in the partnership.

*Establishing a professional learning community.* The BCC program director wished that there had been more time to develop the Professional Learning Community (PLC) among the faculty teaching the GtC courses, and felt that additional training materials on PLCs would be helpful. This sentiment was echoed in interviews with faculty members and resource specialists at BCC. The team was looking forward to more time to plan for and train faculty prior to the start of the 2012 fall semester. They are also putting strategies in place to increase faculty participation in the PLC, because this year only half of the GtC faculty attended frequently.

*Recruitment.* Both sites emphasized the importance of recruiting students who could succeed in the program. At the time of the interview, QCC was anticipating the challenge of recruiting their first cohort of students. Based on their first year of recruiting, BCC shared two thoughts which suggest that recruitment may be easier after the first year. First, by June, BCC had already received 75 applications for the fall cohort. Second, the resource specialists and guidance counselor felt that student orientation during the program’s second year would be strengthened by the presence of students who have already completed a semester of GtC, and who will share their stories and successes with new students.

One issue that may warrant additional discussion among IHEs and partner schools, with assistance from GtCNN and/or ESE, is defining each party’s recruitment duties and responsibilities. A high school guidance counselor suggested that recruiting students from the local high schools was preferable to recruiting students who had perhaps dropped out one or more years earlier and weren’t well known to the system. Her reasoning was that the high school can make more accurate judgments about the potential success of students whom they know well, thereby increasing the chances of a high success rate for GtC. BCC’s program director felt that all eligible and interested students should be told about GtC and invited to an information session, even if this included students who had previously dropped out. He explained that the high school recommends students, but the college then determines through interviews and testing if the student will be accepted into the program.
Implementation Phase

The BCC site opened with 20 students in January of 2012. The “foundation semester” consisted of students taking five core courses together as a learning community. The courses were Reading Development, Basic Writing, Math Foundations, Sociology 101, and the College Success Seminar. Seventy-five percent of the students (N=16) successfully completed the first semester, with an average GPA of 2.9. Some students who left the program did not drop out, but instead returned to other high school options in the city. Two students graduated from high school after the first semester and are staying at the community college to earn their associates degrees.

**Student accountability.** BCC considered their establishment of a high level of accountability among the GtC students to be an important success. Starting with the application process, students had to demonstrate through an interview and a written application that they wanted to be in the program and that they would make school a top priority. (One respondent felt that “getting into GtC is harder than getting into the community college itself.”) Once enrolled, students participated in a two-day mandatory orientation, during which they signed “Student Agreements.” Students who deviated from the Agreement were required to create a “Success Contract” with their resource specialist that was closely monitored to ensure that students were making adequate progress.

**Student support.** Multiple respondents from BCC expressed that the GtC program is effective in supporting students. The resource specialists reported providing a high level of personal support to the students (e.g., finding child care, providing food, and offering one-on-one meetings) in addition to academic support. The director described the resource specialists as “guidance counselors on steroids.” One resource specialist explained that the students went from a ratio of 1 guidance counselor to 200 students in their high school to a ratio of 1 resource specialist to 10 students in GtC. Nonetheless, the high school guidance counselor noted that some supports provided by the high school were not offered by GtC, such as home visits and alternative course completion plans when family illness interrupts a student’s attendance. One BCC faculty member expressed a belief that GtC students would benefit from access to mental health services beyond what the GtC program can offer.

**Aligning with district policy.** Although the implementing district sees GtC as a promising option for students who have not found success in high school, there have been challenges related to conflicts between district and IHE policies, such as appropriate procedures for working with students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). The college and school district are working out how the needs of students with IEPs will be addressed at the college level.

**Access to resources.** The BCC resource specialists and high school partner mentioned that lack of transportation and food availability were challenges during the first semester. Transportation was a challenge for some GtC students, who as high school students had received bus passes. Although providing bus passes was not part of the college’s original plan, they were able to secure bus passes for GtC students in mid-semester. In addition, many students had received free breakfast and free or reduced price lunches in high school, but not at the college, and the school had been an essential food source for some students. The resource specialists had already been making snacks available for students in their office, but they felt that access to more substantial meals would improve the program.
Next Steps

The BCC site expressed concern about their inability to provide the same level of support for the second cohort of students that they did for the first cohort. During the first semester, the resource specialists co-taught the College Success Seminar, but they said that in subsequent years they will need to teach two sections separately. The resource specialists also met with students together. They explained that by co-teaching and meeting with students together, they were both able to understand the students’ needs and histories when students came to them for support. They reported that they have verbally prepared the first-cohort students for the reduced amount of attention they will receive in the fall. In addition, they reported that, during the summer of 2012, BCC would provide on-campus co-op jobs paying $10 per hour (not funded by MassGrad) to the majority of GtC students who completed the foundation semester. They anticipated that during the summer of 2013, when there will be two cohorts of students, obtaining these positions will become more competitive.

The BCC resource specialists and faculty members mentioned academic support improvements that will be made during the 2012-13 program year, including increased time for structured tutoring for all courses, as well as starting classes later, with the intention of reducing tardiness. BCC also said that they would benefit from technical support with measuring and documenting students’ progress. Both BCC and QCC said that they would like clarification from ESE on what their reporting requirements will be. They are hoping that the ESE and GtCNN reporting requirements will be similar, so that they only have to produce one report.

Conclusion

The lessons learned from planning and early implementation of the first MassGrad GtC sites are a potential source of support and improvement across sites. It is promising that the majority of students at the one implementing site successfully completed their first semester in GtC. Subsequent years of implementation across multiple sites will shed light on the GtC model’s effectiveness with larger groups of students in different contexts, and will enable evaluation of quantitative outcomes with regard to graduation rates and other key dropout prevention and recovery indicators.