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93 Millard South students earn college degrees — 2 weeks before finishing high school

By Rick Ruggles / World-Herald staff writer 13 hrs ago



Cassady Alberico, left, and Molly Bull have finished Early College and will graduate from Millard South High School. The program allows students to earn two-year degrees from Metro Community College. "It's about workload."

RYAN SODERLIN/THE WORLD-HERALD

Ninety-three Millard South High School seniors graduated Friday from college.

That is correct — college.

The students also will graduate from Millard South on May 25. But through a new program, the Millard South group was able to get high school and college credit for many of the same classes. Those who graduated Friday were the first to complete the Millard South-Metro Community College partnership and earn associate degrees from Metro.

The initiative, called Early College, exposes high school students to considerable college-level work. The students and their families may save thousands of dollars, depending on where the student would have spent his or her first two years of college.

"I was just really worried that the class load would be too much," said Cassady Alberico, a graduating senior who completed the program. "There were times when I was, like, 'I'm doing too much.' But I got through it."

Molly Bull, another senior in the program, said time management is the key. There are more tests, quizzes and assignments, she said.

“It’s about staying on top of it and getting your work done,” Bull said. It was not so hard that Bull was unable to play varsity softball and tennis, or that Alberico couldn’t participate in school theater projects and show choir.

Many community colleges, including others in Nebraska, have dual-credit programs that give high school students a jump on college. In some cases, students might pile up enough credits through those to get two-year degrees while in high school.

Iowa Western Community College has a program called College Early Start that enables students at southwest Iowa high schools to gain some college credits. Iowa Western also has an on-campus program, as do many colleges, called Early College Academy. The Council Bluffs school district and Iowa Western collaborate on the academy.

But Millard South developed its program with Metro specifically to nudge large groups of students into higher education. At least 150 freshmen sign up for the program each year, so there is a pipeline of 450 or more freshmen, sophomores and juniors on course to get the degree.

The program started with freshmen four years ago. Some don’t make it through. Even those who don’t get the degree may gain credits for college by finishing some classes.

But they risk hurting their permanent college transcript if they finish with poor grades. They are encouraged to withdraw before they perform badly in a class.



Colleges set their sights on rural Nebraskans amid 'competitive marketplace' of enrollment

“There are no surprises,” Millard South Principal Heidi Weaver said. If a student isn’t thriving, he and his parents know it, she said. There are plenty of conversations and interventions, Weaver said.

And one of the positives — that a student gets virtually the first two years of college out of the way — can also be viewed as a negative. The student will miss the campus experience of freshman and sophomore years.

Metro deans and faculty members see to it that the curriculum mirrors that at Metro, said Chuck Chevalier, an associate vice president at Metro.

The program may save students thousands of dollars, depending on where they would have gone for their first two years. Six quarters of full-time classes at Metro cost the typical college student a total of more than \$6,000 in tuition and fees.

Metro discounts tuition for the Millard South students, and the Millard Public Schools Foundation pays half of what’s left, leaving the student to pay a total of about \$400 in tuition. Further aid is available based on need.

Schools and colleges nationwide have developed partnerships to help high school students get moving on their college studies. The Education Commission of the States in Colorado said research shows that these early college high school students “are significantly more likely to graduate high school ... and more likely to enroll in college directly after high school.”

A commission report says such programs are especially beneficial to students at risk of not advancing their education, low-income students, first-generation college-goers and minority students.

The Millard South program is open to all of its students. They must apply and describe in writing their interest in the rigorous program. Not all students are allowed in. The Millard South program encourages high achievers who want to be challenged to get involved.

Chevalier said the classes are demanding. It would do a disservice to make the program less than difficult, he said, because the students wouldn't be prepared for the rest of college. “The worst thing would be the student not being ready for year three,” he said.

Chevalier said the degree meets the general education requirements at Nebraska's three state colleges and the University of Nebraska system. The credits transfer in whole or in part to colleges across the country.

Metro has placed a staff member, Dorothy Johnson, at Millard South to assist with communication. Millard South's assistant vocal music director, Amy Wesely, spends about half of her time on Early College and shares an office with Johnson. Johnson said close to 45 classes are available in the Early College program, and about 40 teachers participate.

Teachers in the program must have a master's degree and in some cases 18 additional credit hours in the subject they will teach. Andy Pinkall, assistant principal at Millard South, said the school district gives scholarships to the teachers who go back to college in order to teach in the program.

Administrators at Millard South and Metro hail the program as a winner. The 93 who graduated from the program represent close to 20 percent of the Millard South seniors, Millard Public Schools Superintendent Jim Sutfin said.

“I can't wait to see what these kids are doing several years from now,” Sutfin said of those in the Early College initiative.

And the program appears to be growing. Millard South administrators expect more than 120 to graduate from Early College next year.

Omaha-area high schools ranked by 2018 ACT scores

We collected 2018 ACT scores from 19 of the biggest schools in the Omaha area. Take a look to see if your school is on the list and where it fell.





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The World-Herald was not able to verify composite ACT scores for Creighton Prep and Marian high schools. The composite ACT score of the graduating class of 2018 for the

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