April 1, 2025

Dear Chair Bongartz and Members of the Senate Education Committee,

My name is Dr. Karen Vatz and I am the Associate Director of Norwich University's Center for Academic Success and Achievement (CASA). In my role at CASA, I oversee our success coach and tutoring programs. I also work closely with students to develop the academic skills they need to succeed in their college-level classes. Additionally, I teach Communications, Writing, French and other courses within the Department of Global Humanities at Norwich. I'm writing today with a vested interest in the benefits in Vermont's Early College program, which provides high school students with the opportunity to gain college-level experience while simultaneously earning credits toward their high school diplomas and future degrees.

1. The Early College Program is beneficial for first-generation college students, providing them with support structures as they navigate higher education. Supports include the ability to live at home in a familiar community, continued involvement from high school counselors, and opportunities for parents to better understand college expectations. The lower-stakes grading environment helps students build confidence as they adjust to college-level coursework. In fall 2022, 4 of the 48 early college students (8%) at Norwich University were first-generation; in fall 2023, 8 of 43 (19%) were first-generation. Note: the first-generation field is an optional question on the application, so it is likely an incomplete dataset.

2. Early College programs have been found to (1) increase the number of students who obtain their associate and bachelor's degrees and (2) decrease the time after high school it takes to earn these degrees (Edmunds et al., 2020). Completing post-secondary degrees more quickly helps to reduce tuition debt and allows students to enter the work force earlier, which in turn may translate to increased state revenue from new taxpayers.

3. Early College programs generate one of the greatest impacts for high school students seeking access to higher education and post-secondary degree completion, especially for low-income and minority students. These programs embed additional support, such as improving students' ability to communicate effectively with faculty and explicitly teaching skills like note-taking, time management, and extensive writing (Edmunds et al., 2020). Edmunds et al. conclude, "early college may serve as a model to help close the gaps in degree attainment, particularly for low-income students" (p. 274).

4. With Vermont's proficiency-based graduation requirements, students may complete most of their high school coursework by the end of their junior year. The Early College Program allows these students to explore a wider range of subject areas that may not be available at their high schools. This includes specialized courses in fields such as criminal justice, cybersecurity, psychology, arts and architecture, and health sciences, offering both breadth and depth in academic

exploration. This is especially valuable for students who are academically motivated but uninterested in AP-focused curriculum/course offerings.

5. Early College opportunities help students determine their areas of interest before committing to a major, reducing the likelihood of costly changes later in their college careers. Additionally, earning transferable credits through the program can significantly reduce overall college expenses. Some students combine Early College with a year at the Community College of Vermont (CCV) before transferring to a four-year institution, significantly lowering the cost of a bachelor's degree.

6. The Early College program also broadens students' experiences in a way dual and concurrent programs do not, particularly for those in rural areas who have spent years in the same small cohort. Exposure to peers from different parts of the country and world enhances their educational experience and cultural awareness.

7. Participating in Early College makes students more competitive applicants for college and scholarships, as they have the opportunity to demonstrate their ability to succeed at the college level.

Investing in Vermont's Early College program will ensure that more students—regardless of their socioeconomic background—have access to high-quality educational opportunities that set them up for success. We urge you to continue supporting and funding Vermont's Early College Program.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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Reference

Edmunds, J. A., Unlu, F., Furey, J., Glennie, E., & Arshavsky, N. (2020). What happens when you combine high school and college? The impact of the early college model on postsecondary performance and completion. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *42*(2), 257-278.