

Savannah Morning News

High school students get started on college careers

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Created 2007-10-29 23:30



Jessica Taylor, left, and Heather Lee, both of Early College, attend Savannah State University's Founder's Day Celebration at Tiger Arena. (Steve Bisson/Savannah Morning News) (Photo: [Steve Bisson](#))

In one afternoon, Heather Lee went from a schoolgirl at Savannah-Chatham County Public Schools to a full-fledged college student.

Lee and about 80 other high school freshmen, sophomores and juniors have enrolled in the district's new Early College Program, where students complete two years of college while earning their high school diplomas.

The program began this year with the help of a \$415,000 grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. It serves students who will be the first in their family to attend college and other underrepresented groups.

Early College students came dressed in their best business attire Friday to tour Savannah State University, participate in the Founder's Day celebration and pick up their official university student ID cards. It was their first official day as college students.

"I've really been looking forward to taking college classes," Lee said.

Early College students take rigorous academic courses in a small group setting at an accelerated pace. By their junior year they will be taking college courses at Savannah State University and Savannah Technical College. Many will specialize in historic

preservation or criminal science.

"Being on campus today will give them the feel and the seriousness of what a university is all about," said Early College Center Leader Danielle Pinkerton, "That will help put the puzzle pieces all together for them."

Many students say the small, focused program has provided them with more counseling and academic motivation than they ever had in traditional school.

"It's more academically focused than social," said student Que'esta Sampson. Travis Perry left 1,620 Groves High classmates behind to participate in the Early College program, where he is one of just 23 high school juniors.

"It makes it easier to learn," he said. "The classes are smaller, and you get more one-on-one time with teachers."

He is already making plans to go to law school.

"Today's high schools are so large that students have the potential to slip through the cracks," said Ann Weisel, the Early College director of guidance. "Our program guarantees that won't happen."