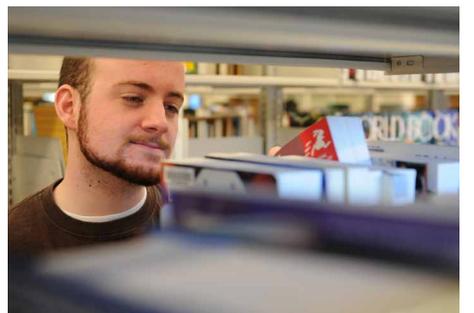




# Fast Track

Graduates of Ohio's Early College High Schools set a pace for early success

Excerpt:  
Terrance





**Graduate** of Canton Early College High School. **Attending** University of Cincinnati, studying criminal justice.

## Terrance Truitt

### On track to enter law school at age 20

When Terrance Truitt arrived at the University of Cincinnati campus, he hit the ground running. At age 18, he was already nearly a full junior with most of his core requirements behind him.

He started out in 300-level classes, which was a challenge but not a problem. And when it came to writing papers to college standards like MLA format, his learning curve was little to none.

“I’ve been doing that since ninth grade,” he said with a happy shrug.

Truitt entered UC in fall 2009 and expects to graduate in winter 2012. He’ll be 20 years old.

But his path to success in college wasn’t an easy one. He was almost derailed after his father, a mill worker, died unexpectedly when he was in the fifth grade.

“My dad was always my support, so when he passed away, I felt like ‘why bother anymore,’” said Truitt. “I really didn’t feel the need to go to college or anything. I thought, ‘if I graduate, that will be good enough.’”

In the years immediately following his father’s death, Truitt got by. Because he was bright, he did well in his school, but he also struggled emotionally.

It wasn’t until his eighth-grade English teacher

pressed him to attend Canton’s new Early College High School that Truitt finally got back on track toward realizing his dream.

From the time he was a little boy, fixated on the flashing lights of neighborhood police cars, Truitt knew that he wanted a career in criminal justice. As he and his mom watched television shows such as *CSI* and *Law and Order* together, his aspirations evolved from police officer to judge to lawyer — and his desire grew to learn all about “the nitty gritty world of criminal justice.”

Canton Early College, which was opening its first ninth-grade class, offered Truitt the opportunity to study in a small school with lots of personal attention and to attend classes at Stark State College. Along with his teacher, his family encouraged him to take advantage of the opportunity to start college.

But Early College gave Truitt an academic wake-up call. From the moment he started high school, he was asked to complete quality work at a quick pace, like a two-page paper on a day’s notice. He got the first Cs and Ds of his life.

“I wasn’t a big fan,” Truitt admitted. “It was a big change freshman year. I struggled. Up until my senior year, I battled with quitting. It felt like a lot of stress.”

Truitt wasn’t at ECHS long before it became clear to the staff that he felt a little rudderless.

“At first, he was resistant to us being supportive of him,” said Jacqueline Talbert, the school secretary. But

finding help readily available and developing close relationships with his teachers slowly helped him find his footing.

A turning point came when Truitt's English class read a Holocaust memoir, *The Children of Willesden Lane*. The class discussed and worked on projects based on the notion of "legacy."

"Terrance was still grieving his father – and I had lost my husband to cancer – so we connected in talking about that book," said English teacher Debbie Turner. "His project was a book about his father's legacy to him – it was the most outstanding project I got that whole year, and maybe in my whole career. From that point on, I held him to that standard."

Strong relationships between teachers and students aren't unusual at ECHS. When teachers are demanding hard work from students, that trust is often the piece that can make the difference between a young person's success and failure.

"Students become a part of my heart," said Turner. "They know I care about them as individuals. We have created a family atmosphere here."

"We all have the same mission as a staff. We're connected through our students – if I'm not making a connection with my students, I can often find out through my colleagues how I might make that connection."

Truitt felt that most as he navigated courses at Stark State, where he took classes alongside people of usual college age without a net. When things got tough, he went to the ECHS staff for help.

"The teachers did a lot more than they had to. They would schedule around you if you came to them with a bad situation, like 'I'm failing this class, what can I do?' They would stay an extra hour to help."

Truitt's family also saw teachers and staff members go the extra mile to help him.

"I saw him being passionate about wanting to learn – he was always at school. It was a very positive experience to see my brother succeed like that," said Joyce Strader, his older sister. "His instructors, the people who ran it – they were always there for him."

But believing in himself was a bumpy ride, and Truitt faced some of his first real personal challenges while taking college courses as a high school student. At one point, as a senior, he felt that a college professor didn't like him and was taking it out on his grade. He thought seriously about quitting.

His mother encouraged him, reminding him of how



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far he'd already come, but he went to tell principal Valerie Pack he wanted to leave.

"She really made me open my eyes," said Truitt. "She said, 'Go ahead, just quit. What's that going to do for you?' She sat me down and we talked about everything. She let me know that in order to be successful, I was going to have to overcome roadblocks. She said, 'Just let this be another speed bump on your way to success.' I really took those words to heart."

Canton Early College High School helped bring him closer to his dream more quickly than he could have imagined. Before traveling down I-71 and settling into life at a university with a top-rated criminal justice program, he already had his associate's degree and plenty of academic and life skills for college-level work.

While Truitt recalled an early college career filled with doubt and uncertainty, his teachers described him as humble, thoughtful and a leader. He worked hard, and often didn't realize that he was setting standards for other students. He was awarded outstanding student and made an ambassador of the school.

"I don't think he realized that he was that well-regarded," said Talbert. "It just really cemented his self-esteem and self-worth."

It also cemented his ambition. With his associate's degree came the distinction of being the first in his family to earn a college degree, but that just made him look toward his next accomplishments.

"Getting my associate's made me feel special, I would say," said Truitt. "But by the next day I didn't feel special, I felt like 'what am I going to do next?' And I started looking toward getting my bachelor's and my J.D. (Juris Doctorate)."

Turner remembers that day as the moment when Truitt moved beyond being her student. "He couldn't wait to call me by my first name, which I told him he could not do until he had that degree," she said. "When I congratulated him at graduation, he said 'Thanks, Debbie.'"

Turner said she is confident that Truitt will accomplish everything he sets out to do.

“I told him you had better let me know at each graduation because I am going to be there with fireworks,” she said. “He deserves to be celebrated every step of the way.”

For now, those steps include classes and a work-study position in UC’s admissions office, where he has clearance to handle students’ private information. He is being mentored by a retired appeals court justice as part of the college program, and is considering which law schools he will apply to. While he’s decided to minor in political science and has a keen interest in the ethics of the U.S. justice system, he’s leaning toward studying corporate law.

When Truitt visits home, he stops at ECHS regularly

to see his teachers and talk to current students. He also stays in touch online, cautioning students not to squander the opportunity they’ve been given, to do their work and to ask for help when they need it.

“Going to early college is the best choice I think I’ve made so far in my life. I became a very independent person,” said Truitt. “The early college teachers helped me get there. They gave me the tools to learn how to approach people and ask for help – to not be embarrassed to ask for help.

“They taught me how to be a better person and how not to let stuff get to you. When you’re faced with obstacles, they teach you how to cope with it.”

— Tracy Zollinger Turner

## Early College High Schools in Ohio

Across Ohio, early college high schools are changing what it means to be a college student. These schools take the young teenagers who are least likely to attend college and most likely to be performing below grade level, then put them in an atmosphere with high levels of support and high expectations. They allow students to start taking college courses in grade 9 or 10 and earn up to 60 hours of college credit by the time they graduate from high school.

The nine Ohio Early College High Schools in the KnowledgeWorks network are showing remarkable results. They report an average graduation rate of 91 percent and more than one in three ECHS students graduate with a high school diploma and two years of college credit or an associate’s degree. Others earn substantial college credits that speed their journey toward a degree.

More than 90 percent of ECHS 10th graders scored proficient or higher on the Ohio Graduation Test in reading, writing, mathematics and social studies, outperform-

ing the state average. Greater percentages of students from ECHS schools scored accelerated or advanced on Ohio state achievement tests than students at comparable high schools, suggesting that they are more college ready.

What happens when these young adults – almost all of them the first in their families to attend college or students who likely would not continue their education without the boost of ECHS – move beyond the carefully structured and nurturing environments of their high schools? Research shows that they are more likely to enroll in and complete college.

But research data is only part of the answer. Each of the remarkable young adults who has graduated from an Early College High School has a unique story of accomplishment and challenge. Each has a dream as individual as his or her journey. To learn more about early college high schools or meet other ECHS alumni, please go to [www.OhioEducationMatters.org](http://www.OhioEducationMatters.org).