

## Bridging the Great Divide Between Secondary Schools And Postsecondary Education

By Michael Kirst and Andrea Venezia

*What forms should K-16 collaboration take in order to improve college-going and completing rates? Though they are still in the initial stages of data analysis, Mr. Kirst and Ms. Venezia share with readers some emerging themes.*

EDUCATION reform is sweeping the nation. The development of K-12 standards and accountability mechanisms; the assessment of K-12 schools, teachers, and students; and shifting college admissions policies are just a few of the many areas of reform activity. Although there are a number of K-16 projects in many states, little effort has been made to coordinate reform systemically across educational levels in order to improve academic opportunities and the chances of success throughout students' entire educational lives.

Historically, educational change has been isolated within either the K-12 or the higher education sector. Standards for defining college-level coursework and remedial courses, for example, are traditionally determined solely by higher education institutions, while K-12 entities define the curricula for non-Advanced Placement "college prep" courses in high schools. The lack of coordination between the public K-12 and postsecondary sectors impedes successful transitions between the systems and diminishes educational opportunity for many students. Problems related to this disconnect are noticeable in areas such as access to college-prep courses, grade inflation, placement into remedial-level coursework in college, conflicting conceptions of student assessment, special problems endemic to the senior year in high school, and a lack of early and high-quality college counseling for all students. We discuss these issues below.

The lack of connection between K-12 and higher education is rooted deeply in the history of U.S. education policy. The country's two separate systems of mass education—K-12 on one hand and universities and colleges on the other—rarely collaborated to establish consistent standards. In 1900 the education sectors were linked somewhat because the College Board set uniform standards for each academic subject and issued a syllabus to help students get ready for subject-matter examina-

tions. But this connection, never very strong, first frayed and then fell apart, and the only remaining linkage of consequence is usually through teacher preparation programs in schools of education.

Higher education systems and institutions have little incentive to collaborate with K-12 districts and schools. While local partnerships focused on outreach issues exist, there are few levers in place, such as K-16 accountability systems or funding mechanisms that cross the sectors, to encourage higher education to change its practices. K-12 policies, such as standards and assessments, are at the mercy of political forces, while state legislatures and governors often view higher education as comparatively untouchable.

Several problems surfacing in both education systems seem to be a direct consequence of the lack of coordinated standards and the confusing signals that this situation sends to students and educators alike. For example, in response to a national survey conducted in June 2000 by ACT, Inc., 20 percent of students bound for four-year institutions and nearly 40 percent of students headed for two-year schools indicated that they would not take all the courses ACT deemed necessary for college-level work.<sup>1</sup> Also, retention and completion rates in many of our public colleges and universities are very low. Graduation rates at the least selective public universities in many states range between 30 percent and 50 percent.<sup>2</sup> The U.S. Department of Education reported that more than one-quarter of freshmen at four-year colleges and nearly half of those at two-year colleges do not make it to their second year.<sup>3</sup>

While many of these problems are created by structural inequalities in the schools and in society at large, it may be possible that, by coordinating reform efforts across the K-16 system, we could improve academic outcomes for all students. Forty-nine states have created K-12 content standards in most academic subjects, and almost all of those states have statewide K-12 student assessments. The next steps are to articulate college-level expectations more clearly to K-12 stakeholders and to tie policies and data together across the sectors.

Our research with the Consortium for Policy Research in Education and Stanford University's Bridge Project links streams of work on K-16 policy coherence and incentives with conceptions of policy "signaling." We view policies and practices in the areas of admissions and placement as communicating signals, meaning, and expectations to secondary school students and K-12 educators. Crucial aspects of these signals and incentives are clarity and consistency. Consistency occurs when signals, incentives, and institutional policies all require students to possess similar knowledge and skills. We focus on signals and incentives that will enhance the "college knowledge" of prospective students in secondary schools - that will help them be admitted to colleges, be placed into college-level courses upon entry, and complete their desired degrees (or community college competencies).<sup>4</sup> Such signals are especially important for students who are currently not exposed to high-level curricula or who do not receive information about college in a consistent manner from their parents, counselors, siblings, or teachers.

Often, the task of preparing students for college falls entirely on the K-12 system, but it is ill suited to carry this burden alone. From our research, we found that few teachers, counselors, and administrators have much knowledge of college admission and placement policies. Without such knowledge, they cannot transmit accurate information to students. In addition, not all high school students are held to high standards. A recent Metropolitan Life Survey found that 71 percent of the students surveyed expected to go on to a four-year college, but the teachers believed that only 32 percent of their students should continue on to higher education.<sup>5</sup>

Our research in Texas and preliminary findings in other project states show that, while most students need better information about college preparation, students who are in accelerated curricular tracks in high school receive clearer signals about college preparation than do their peers in other tracks. Students in high-level courses receive such information from a variety of sources - the challenging content of their courses, university recruitment efforts, parents, counselors, other students, and teachers who are knowledgeable about college-level standards. But many students in middle- and lower-level high school courses are not reached by recruitment efforts or by college counselors in their high schools, and many economically disadvantaged parents lack the experience and information to help their children prepare for college.<sup>6</sup>

We can no longer afford the excuse that, because not all students attend college, we do not need to set high standards for all students. Approximately 70 percent of students enter postsecondary education after high school.<sup>7</sup> The other 30 percent need high-level skills and knowledge to succeed in the labor market and to be able to participate fully in our society.

In sum, the disconnect between K-12 and higher education manifests itself in several crucial areas. As mentioned above, these include:

#### [Access to college-preparatory courses in the core subject areas](#)

An inequitable distribution of academic opportunities in high schools can close the door to college for some students and lead to inadequate preparation for others. An Outreach Task Force from the University of California found a “continuing pattern of differing outcomes for racial and ethnic groups” in California’s K-12 schools, with the groups “least represented in higher education remaining most concentrated in the lowest-performing schools.” Out of the state’s public high school graduates, approximately 4 percent of Latinos, 4 percent of African Americans, 13 percent of non-Latino whites, and 32 percent of Asians met the eligibility requirements for the University of California system.<sup>8</sup>

#### [Grade inflation and a reliance on grades as predictors](#)

Many current admissions policies rely heavily on grades to predict student success in college; recent research has found a trend toward grade inflation that some posit is related to the perceived need to help students compete for college admission. For example, 31.5 percent of freshman students at UCLA reported having an A average in high school in 1996, compared to 28.1 percent in 1995 and 12.5 percent in 1969.<sup>9</sup> The value of these “objective” measures of performance for evaluating students

and predicting their success in college is becoming more and more questionable.

### The need for remedial-level coursework in college

The extent of remedial education at the college level in the U.S. is large. Nationally, in 1995, nearly three out of 10 first-time freshmen enrolled in at least one remedial course.<sup>10</sup> In 2000, in the California State University system, more than two-thirds of regularly admitted first-year students did not meet college-level standards in at least one placement exam. Forty-six percent did not fare well in reading and writing, while 45 percent did not meet the standards in mathematics.<sup>11</sup>

### Conflicting conceptions of student assessment

Differences between the content and format of assessments used at the K-12 exit level and those used at the college-entrance level point to variances in expectations regarding what students need to know and be able to do to graduate from high school and enter college. New K-12 standards and assessments increasingly require students to construct meaning, solve problems, and learn cooperatively, in addition to memorizing facts. At the same time, admission and placement decisions in higher education are mostly based on multiple-choice tests, grades, and other “objective” measures of students’ secondary-level performance. For example, many states are using writing samples in their K-12 assessments. By contrast, the ACT and SAT college entrance exams use multiple-choice formats to test writing attainment.<sup>12</sup> College placement exams often measure students’ knowledge of a subject according to a standard set by large-scale assessment developers or by professors in university departments. The Education Trust has shown that placement standards in mathematics often include second-year algebra, while admission tests rarely go beyond first-year algebra.<sup>13</sup>

### Special problems endemic to the senior year of high school

Current admission and placement policies create incentives that influence seniors in negative ways. College preparation occurs primarily between grades 8 and 11 because admission processes begin early in the senior year. Our research shows that placement exams at most institutions of higher education are not publicized to high schools or to entering students and are usually administered as part of the orientation process. Consequently, students cannot prepare for them during high school.

Higher education institutions rarely look at senior-year grades or hold students accountable if their grades do slip or if their course-taking patterns change drastically. Also, some students take the highest-level math courses during their junior year in high school and have few math options in their senior year. A typical pattern for many students who plan to attend less selective four-year institutions or community colleges is not to take any math in the senior year.

### A lack of early and high-quality college counseling for many students

Counselors face a range of responsibilities that compete for their time; students with special needs and students placed in gifted programs often receive the bulk of counselors’ attention. While this emphasis is necessary, it leaves many students with few available people at the school site who are familiar with college-transition issues. Also,

many high schools do not have counselors who specialize only in the transition from high school to college.<sup>14</sup>

In recent years, many states and localities have developed innovative ways to eliminate or reduce these problems and connect K-12 and higher education. These include the Proficiency-Based Admission Standards System (PASS) in Oregon, P-16 and K-16 councils in Georgia and Maryland, and the El Paso Collaborative, to name a few.

These efforts range from the complex restructuring of governance and policymaking to the creation of ancillary programs. Even if attempts to increase policy compatibility across systems succeed, there is no guarantee that the reforms will reflect high-quality standards and assessments. In a rush to reach consensus, reformers might settle for the lowest common denominator. Simply aligning current standards and assessments, especially if they are of poor quality or do not correspond to what is taught in the classroom, is not going to solve deeply entrenched problems.

What forms, then, should K-16 collaboration take in order to improve college-going and completion rates? Although we are in the initial stages of data analysis for most of our project states, some consistent themes are emerging. Parents, counselors, and teachers need to be better informed about college admission and placement if they are to send clear signals about college preparation. The effort to provide this information must go beyond targeted outreach and fragmented categorical programs to universal programs for all students. K-12 assessments that are aligned with higher education standards can provide clear signals and incentives. These assessments should be diagnostic in nature, and the results should include performance levels that indicate to students whether their scores meet or exceed the level for college preparation and placement without remediation.

New strategies are being advocated by influential forces. Recently, Richard Atkinson, president of the University of California (UC) System, called for the elimination of the use of the SAT I for admission purposes. He recommended that UC require tests that assess specific subject areas rather than those that assess, as he put it, “undefined notions of ‘aptitude’ or ‘intelligence.’”<sup>15</sup>

The following recommendations are based on research conducted for the Bridge Project and a review of relevant literature.<sup>16</sup>

- Provide all students with information about and access to courses that will prepare them to meet college-level standards.
- Examine the relationship between the content of higher education placement exams and K-12 exit-level standards and assessments to determine if more compatibility is necessary. Publicize the content, standards, and consequences of placement exams to students in high schools so that they understand and can prepare for higher education expectations.
- Review placement exams - including assessments developed by individual

campuses, departments, and faculty members - for reliability, validity, authenticity, and teaching for understanding. Colleges need to maintain data regarding the success of placement procedures. States need K-16 data systems so that they can analyze, for example, the relationship between student course-taking patterns in high school and the need for remedial work in college or examine longitudinal trends concerning what happens to students after they complete remedial-level coursework.

- Use data, when relevant, from state K-12 assessments as an additional indicator of college readiness. These data could be used for undergraduate admission and placement purposes and to study students' college-level success. Higher education and K-12 representatives should work together to develop performance levels for K-12 assessments with regard to higher education admission and placement standards.
- Allow students to take placement exams in high school so that they can prepare academically for college and understand college-level expectations. These assessments should be diagnostic in nature so that students, parents, and teachers know what is necessary to improve students' preparation for college.
- Sequence undergraduate general education requirements so that appropriate senior-year high school courses are linked to the higher education general education courses.
- Expand successful dual or concurrent enrollment programs that include all students, not just traditionally "college-bound" students. Many students are not comfortable socially or emotionally in high school environments, while others complete their schools' highest-level courses as sophomores and juniors and have trouble finding appropriate courses as seniors. In addition, concurrent enrollment programs can stimulate curricular review and innovation in both systems.
- Publicize reports about college-level remediation and students' first-year college performance (aggregated at the high school or district level) in mass media outlets, and ensure that policy implications are considered by local school boards.

All these recommendations will be easier to carry out and to implement effectively if there is an overall organizational base for K-16 policy making and oversight. Few states have such an entity. Most states implicitly discourage K-16 policy making by having separate K-12 and higher education legislative committees, funding streams, and state agencies. These barriers inhibit joint policy making and communication regarding issues such as funding, data sharing, student learning (curriculum, standards, and assessment), matriculation and transfer, teacher training and professional development, and accountability. Having a K-16 entity does not, however, ensure that innovative K-16 reforms will follow. Only a concerted effort by policy makers, educators, parents, and students will do the job.

Despite the many separations and barriers that have historically prevented K-16 reform, many states are working to bring the two systems together. A recent paper from the Institute for Educational Leadership stated that K-16 reform "seems to be emerging in the early stages of consciousness-raising."<sup>17</sup> In many states,

representatives from both K-12 and postsecondary education are talking and deliberating together more than ever before, but what is usually lacking is a structure to continue that dialogue over the long term. New York, Oregon, Georgia, Maryland, Texas, and Oklahoma were cited in a recent Education Week article for developing reforms that join the two systems together around such issues as standards, assessments, and course requirements.<sup>18</sup> Although many of these efforts are new and have not been evaluated, they are important first steps to ensure that all students can prepare for, enter, and succeed in postsecondary education.

### Citations and References

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16. These recommendations are from a student-centered perspective; they do not include changes in teacher preparation programs and other possible K-16 reforms. A list of recommendations to improve the quality of the senior year in high school, in addition to state-specific recommendations for project states, can be found on our website, [www.stanford.edu/groups/bridgeproject/](http://www.stanford.edu/groups/bridgeproject/).
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