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OPINION

What States Must Do

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Throughout the country, public-school districts, states, the federal government, businesses, foundations, and policy organizations are focusing on reforming high schools to provide opportunities for all students to reach higher academic standards. A key objective of many of those efforts has been to enhance student readiness for college, especially for students from groups traditionally underrepresented in postsecondary education.

Although many students would like to pursue higher education, less than one-fifth of ninth graders finish high school within four years, go on to college, and then complete a bachelor's degree within six years. Moreover, many students of color and those who are economically disadvantaged are significantly less likely to earn high-school degrees and enroll in and graduate from college than are affluent white students. Our education system is letting too many young people fall through the cracks.

Yet any reforms that focus on either K-12 or higher education alone are likely to perpetuate the barriers that thwart student success. Some of the most difficult challenges can be found at the juncture between our high schools and colleges.

Within each state and at the federal level, a profound division persists between elementary and secondary education, on the one hand, and higher education, on the other — a division that significantly hinders many students' abilities to prepare for and complete college. Although both sectors should work together to educate and meet the needs of students, they continue to operate far apart, with different boards of education, legislative committees, and coordinating boards.

Many states have begun to organize councils or commissions that include representatives from both K-12 and higher education to resolve cross-sector issues. But simple cooperation is not sufficient to create the depth of reform that is needed. As one state commissioner for higher education said recently at a meeting of K-12 and higher-education policy makers, "It was naïve thinking that if you got the right players around the table, you'd get the right things done. It helps to have an agenda." In fact, statewide K-16 structures have in some cases become forums for discussion only, rather than drivers of change.

Effective state efforts to improve linkages between schools and colleges must extend well beyond local or regional collaborations. They must reach further than joint meetings or new memoranda of understanding. And they need to go beyond just structural tinkering in schools, colleges, or government oversight groups. The educational needs of students demand changes in the fundamental policies that created and now reinforce the chasm between K-12 and postsecondary education.

How did that chasm occur and become so embedded in American education? In part, from the laudable way that our nation created a mass-education system for public schools. The comprehensive high school was designed for other purposes than college preparation — for instance, teaching students basic skills. High-quality college-preparation opportunities have historically been offered only to a limited number of students who take challenging courses on a "college track." There hasn't been the need for close collaboration between the two systems that there is now, when a

college degree has almost become a necessity for economic advancement.

In addition, postsecondary institutions and systems have not typically been involved in developing high-school standards. The one exception was in the early 1900s, when the College Board set uniform standards for each academic subject and issued a syllabus to help students prepare for college-entrance subject-matter examinations. Until then each college had its own entrance requirements. Soon after the College Board became involved, the University of California began to accredit high schools to ensure that their curricula adequately prepared students for college. Yet the number of high schools grew so rapidly that college accreditors could not keep pace. The eventual emergence of regional high-school accrediting associations and the resulting split between high-school and college accreditors de-emphasized any alignment between the two sectors.

By the end of World War II, the notion of K-16 academic standards had vanished. "Aptitude" tests like the SAT replaced subject-matter standards, and increasingly high-school teachers and college professors rarely met with each other. Nor did policy makers in K-12 and higher education cross each other's paths very often.

That situation must be rectified, however, if students are to have the opportunities they need to achieve their full academic potential, move from one educational level to the next, and complete their intended courses of study in postsecondary education. Our research shows that states must create reforms in four key policy areas and connect elementary and secondary education with higher education across them all: curriculum and assessment, finance, data collection, and accountability. In addition, governance mechanisms must reinforce and sustain those efforts.

Specifically, state governments can make substantial gains toward closing the longstanding gap within our education system if they:

Stimulate high schools and colleges to align their courses and assessments to improve college readiness. Right now the standards movement in K-12 education and efforts to improve higher education are operating on different tracks. For example, a widespread strategy to improve student readiness for college has been to increase enrollments in college-preparatory courses. Yet despite some successes, remediation rates in colleges have been estimated to be as high as 63 percent at two-year institutions and 40 percent at four-year institutions nationally.

As a nation, we are learning that the number of courses that high-school students take, and the units and names assigned to those courses, are often inadequate proxies for whether or not high-school graduates are prepared to succeed in college-level work. The quality and level of the course work and instruction, and their level of alignment with postsecondary expectations, are the key elements of effective reform.

Ideally, exit standards from one education sector would equal the entrance standards of the next. But for too long, we have relied on incomplete measures of academic rigor for high-school classes. While that has been detrimental for all students, it has been particularly harmful for students whose parents have not attended college and who do not understand the kinds of skills needed to succeed there.

In addition, the benchmarks for high-school assessments in most states are pegged at the level of eighth, ninth, or 10th grade. Few standards are developed for 11th or 12th grades or connected to the academic expectations of colleges.

States can improve assessment alignment in several ways. Elementary and secondary schools can embed postsecondary standards in their K-12 statewide tests. For example, Colorado, Illinois, and Michigan use the ACT for all their 11th-grade exams, and Maine uses the SAT 1. Or the two levels can develop standards and assessments together. In California the California State University System worked withthe K-12 system to jointly augment the state's 11th-grade test.

Provide incentives in state budgets for increasing the proportion of students who complete high school and enroll in college. Most state systems perpetuate the divide between K-12 and higher education by creating separate streams of financial support for each sector. State budgets lack any incentives to promote college-readiness reforms. For example, states could offer financial incentives to both systems to offer dual enrollment or to reduce remediation.

While no state has fully established an integrated K-16 finance model, Oregon may be moving in that direction. The Oregon Business Council analyzed state expenditures in 2002-3 for both schools and colleges as though they came from one budget and found that the level of investment varied by grade and degree — with community colleges receiving the least state aid and K-12 special education receiving the most. It recommended to the governor that Oregon reform its system so that, among other things, budgets would explicitly decide the level of support per student for different services and the measurable outcomes anticipated.

The governor, who has set goals for high-school graduation and college completion, and a joint board that includes members from both the state board of education and the board of higher education have called for the establishment of a unified education system with curriculum alignment and a budget that connects all sectors. More states should follow a similar path.

Create data systems to track student progress across educational levels and institutions. Currently most states are unable to determine if their efforts to improve student readiness for college are having any impact. Although many are working to improve their ability to gather information — Florida, for example, already has a system up and running that links K-12 and postsecondary education, along with other public data — few, if any, currently link information from schools and colleges. Some states do not even collect data on the course-taking patterns of their high-school students.

Consequently, in those states, it is impossible to determine the relationships between the courses that high-school students take and students' persistence and success in college. Likewise, it is impossible to identify and analyze success rates for students who enter college from the work force, students who attend part time, or students who attend multiple institutions. In short, the lack of reliable facts and figures that connect different levels of education makes it difficult to assess needs accurately, identify the worst problems, work toward finding solutions, and evaluate reforms.

States should be able to use their data systems to answer questions like:

- How do students who take college-preparatory courses in high school perform in postsecondary education?
- Considering those students who require remediation in college, what percentage took a college-preparatory curriculum in high school?
- How do students who pass — or earn a proficient score on — a state assessment perform in college?
- What pedagogical approaches are common among high-school teachers who consistently send well-prepared students to college?
- Given their students' performance in college, how can high schools change their curricula and instruction to improve student readiness for college?

In February teams from more than 30 states met to work toward developing comprehensive K-16 data systems and determine how policy makers could use data from those systems to create policies that improve educational outcomes. That effort, organized by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, the U.S. Department of Education, and the Florida Department of Education, is a good step in the right direction.

Publicly report on student progress and success from high school to postsecondary education. To be effective in improving college readiness, states should establish student-achievement objectives that require the education systems to collaborate to reach them. High schools and colleges also need to learn how to use the information to improve teaching and learning. For example, high schools should use data about their graduates' performance in college to improve their curricula, instruction, and grading.

To carry out the reforms that we have recommended, states need to provide incentives to better integrate K-16 governance. They should establish and support cross-sector commissions, charge them with specific responsibilities,

provide the requisite resources, give them enough influence and authority to make real change, and hold them accountable for their performance. The agencies and groups involved with education within each state must also collaborate.

In addition, research should focus on the four policy areas and how state governance can stimulate and reinforce desired educational outcomes. Finally, strong leadership from both governors and legislative leaders, depending on the state, is needed to frame the college-readiness issue so as to build public support.

Engaging in such reforms will undoubtedly be challenging. States may struggle with how to involve the governor or the appropriate legislative committees and to sustain reforms after various state leaders leave office. Each state will also have to take into account its own distinct political and educational cultures.

But improving the transition from high school to college is crucial, given the convergence of demographic changes throughout the nation, current educational inequalities, and a global economy that requires higher levels of knowledge and skills than ever before. For the benefit of not only students and parents but all citizens, every state can and should help close the divide between our nation's schools and colleges.

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