P-16 Alignment of Educational Success[*]

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1 Introduction

Education leaders have implemented numerous programs and some systems designed to meet the demands of educational reform P-16. Often, however, such efforts lack alignment. Even more, student success has not always been a priority within high school reform. As educational leaders consider alternative approaches to organizational changes in education, the challenges to P-16 alignment should be reviewed. Without alignment of P-16 systems, many students will continue to face unnecessary barriers.

2 The P-16 Concept

An understanding of the importance of the integrated P-16 concept is a critical first step for removing unnecessary barriers to student success and educational attainment. Van de Water and Rainwater (2001) identified the concept as follows:

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2.1

P-16 is the shorthand term for an integrated system of education stretching from early childhood (the "P" stands for prekindergarten or preschool) through a four-year college degree ("grade 16")...Some proponents label this a "seamless" system to underscore the need to recognize the interdependency and common goals among preschool, elementary, secondary and postsecondary education. (p. 4)

The integration of educational systems for P-16 is focused on student success starting with early education, raising academic standards, implementing and using common assessments, along with improved teacher quality and effective transitions for students (Van de Water & Rainwater).

3 Benefits and Strengths of P-16

The P-16 system was conceptualized to foster ideal educational outcomes. Some of these outcomes include improved student achievement, teacher preparation, and college access (Van de Water & Rainwater, 2001). To meet such outcomes, Van de Water and Rainwater highlighted various strengths of a P-16 system, such as having inclusive and aligned efforts, supporting standards and assessments, providing a logical progression, and reducing remediation and barriers. They argued that an effective P-16 system can lead to (a) increased collaboration at all levels, (b) aligned standards and curriculum, (c) widespread understanding of goals and expectations, (d) lower dropout rates in secondary schools and post-secondary institutions. Thus, it was noted that such improvements should improve educational attainment, thus resulting in desired private and public benefits.

4 Public Policy Challenges

Public policy is central to the P-16 concept. Public policy is often established through various collaborative efforts. For the most part, it is clear that policy is established through traditional practices, as well as through advocacy, educational efforts, research and data-based decisions, and various unique levers. Yet, concerted actions toward change do not always include the necessary representatives from the general public or from unique agencies. This is why policies can lack alignment or become disjointed.

4.1 Disconnected Systems

Venezia, Kirst, and Antonio (2003) identified the disconnected K-12 and higher education systems as a key policy issue. Although the disconnected systems seemed to be presented as the primary policy issue, this aspect was further divided into two areas: (1) an overall disjunction between K-12 and higher education and (2) student, parent, and K-12 educators' understandings and misunderstandings. Primarily, their report found that the disconnected system makes for confusing and mixed information, which inhibits educational stakeholders from knowing the processes for high school graduation or higher education readiness. Policies must be aligned among all educational systems, and information must be disseminated to all educational stakeholders. By doing so, educational outcomes, particularly access to higher education, may be improved.

4.2 Lack of Aligned Performance Outcomes

Yet, it is often difficult for educational institutions to help aspiring students reach their educational goals when states and educational systems do not have aligned performance outcomes. This was a key policy issue discussed in Wegner's (2003) report. This report called for states to take action to change policy, particularly with respect to states' needs for defining their purpose, creating necessary policy, and knowing their performance expectations in order for higher education to meet them. It highlighted the questions that states should be asking when assessing efforts toward continuity and alignment among systems. Wegner noted that "a state that lacks the means or the will to define and pursue its public priorities effectively accords its public institutions open license to pursue goals of their own choosing, with minimal regard to a state's public purposes" (p. 15). States have leadership roles in creation of appropriate policy that can lead

to effective outcomes for higher education as well. Wegner also stressed that "if a state lacks the political will to ask the hard questions that link its educational policies to the outcomes that the system of higher education achieves, then the result can easily become a system of higher education that falls short of its potential" (p. 22). In essence, reformed state policy can better connect the aspects of state efforts with the stated expectations and outcomes.

4.3 Presence of a Governance Divide

Educational expectations and outcomes can face barriers to success with the presence of a governance divide. Aspects of a governance divide have a critical role in policy issues (Venezia, Callan, Finney, Kirst, & Usdan, 2005). Venezia et al. affirmed that systems are disjointed, expressed a need for reform, and touched upon the consequences of the misalignment of policies, knowledge, and efforts. More specifically, it was discussed that political levers of finance, assessment, curriculum, and accountability must be reformed to facilitate effective governances at all levels of education. At the same time, policy makers must align resources with desired goals.

4.4 Remedial/Developmental Education in Higher Education

When policies and reform are considered, the use of data-based decision-making is often recommended. Yet, this concept seldom applies. For example, when higher education remedial and developmental courses are considered, "almost no evidence exists to confirm the superiority of one practice over another" (Grubb & Cox, 2005, p. 93); common practices may include embedding developmental education through college learning communities, integrating remediation with general college experiences, or targeting high-risk courses, rather than at-risk students. This certainly makes it difficult to make appropriate decisions about implementing or removing these courses. Even more, courses have many other factors that contribute to students' success. For example, Grubb and Cox noted that the instructor, the students, the curriculum, and the institution influence the classroom experience in a number of ways. These authors found that students are often "focused on grades rather than content, on efficiency rather than understanding, and on useful or *relevant* [original emphasis] courses rather than those that might amplify their intellectual sophistication and afford some future, uncertain, and poorly understood benefit" (p. 97).

Considering this complexity, Grubb and Cox (2005) highlighted the need to coordinate and align courses with a coherent program of studies. They stressed that students may still be underprepared after taking developmental courses, if those courses are not strategically aligned with subsequent courses . According to Grubb and Cox, there are certain processes that can be followed to improve pedagogical alignment. They suggested diagnosing student perspectives, examining faculty and providing support/training services, examining the trajectory of developmental curriculum, assessing institutional support, and having an overall plan for success. Grubb and Cox recognized that developmental education resulted as a direct response to students' learning needs. At the same time, they noted that institutions cannot give up on underprepared students.

The Alliance for Excellent Education (AEE, 2006) stated that, by offering remediation, "the nation loses more than $3.7 billion a year. This figure includes $1.4 billion to provide remedial education to students who have recently completed high school" (p. 1). They noted that only half of the high school graduates are prepared for higher education, which leads to lower persistence and completion rates in higher education. Further, they acknowledged that remediation is not always for recent high school graduates, as it is also offered to a diverse group of students, such as laid-off workers, older students, or recent immigrants who are often factored into the remedial rates. In any case, AEE acknowledged that "high schools must align the content of their coursework with the skills and knowledge students need in today's increasingly competitive and demanding world...the need for remediation in college will drop dramatically" (p. 4).

4.5 Transfer and Articulation in Higher Education

In addition to improved remediation policies, effective transfer and articulation policies are needed in higher education. Such policies can help to support students' efforts toward degree attainment, and they can improve communication among educational institutions. Transfer articulation can also help the faculty know whether students have taken courses or certain prerequisites needed for degree requirements. In the end, this transfer and articulation can lead to private and public benefits because time and money could be saved by keeping students on a desired pace for degree attainment when transferring institutions. In Wellman's (2002) report, the two-year to four-year (2/4) transfer performance was a key variable that should be addressed by policy. There were eight suggested recommendations for addressing this issue. For brevity, each recommendation will not be listed here. However, Wellman particularly noted the importance of transfer "because its success (or failure) is central to many dimensions of state higher education performance, including access, equity, affordability, cost effectiveness, degree productivity, and quality" (p. 3). The transfer policy and performance of six states were discussed and differences and similarities were identified. Overall, it was found that common structural and academic processes were in place, but there was often a lack of efforts on unique transfer issues. Also, the states had different outcomes—some successful but not all. For success to occur, a critical knowledge of unique 2/4 policies within each state is needed to improve performance.

The American Association of Community Colleges and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AACC/AASCU, 2004) presented similar problems to the above report. For example, the AACC and AASCU mentioned that the 2/4 transfer aspects, such as (a) the nontraditional profile of students at community colleges, (b) differing missions, (c) faculty attitudes, (d) advising, and (e) state and system policy barriers, serve as problems to access. Therefore, the key policy issue of this report was concerned with changing policies in order to improve access and transfer from the community college to the university. It was noted that "in too many states, funding and accountability policies provide few incentives to encourage cooperation and student movement between education sectors or institutions" (AACC/AASCU, 2004, p. 6). The AASCU focused on the development of a seamless transfer. It was indicated that statewide cooperative agreements, common course number systems, a statewide common core, financial incentives, stronger governance structures, and having an understanding of barriers in transfer policies can lead to the creation of successful policies.

In essence, separate educational systems are predominately established among all levels, but changes in policies can boost efforts for P-16 reform. As there are issues of disconnected systems, there are also issues within each system. Therefore, goals toward a P-16 system cannot be linear and must be systemic. As a result, "each state must seek its own path, shaped by its leaders, its culture, its history, and its prospects for change" (Venezia et al., 2005, p. 39). In other words, there is not a one-size-fits-all solution. Although this requires unique systemic changes, progress toward the ideal can be made if policies are improved.

5 Examples and Strategic Reform Efforts

5.1 Strategies

A vision and mission can initiate a path toward improvement. For P-16 alignment there are major policies that need reform. Still, if efforts begin in one area, a push for change in other areas may be sparked. The report by the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO, 2003) identified five specific areas that can be targeted to strategically enhance student success and promote statewide P-16 systems: (1) early outreach, (2) curriculum and assessment systems, (3) high quality teaching, (4) student financial assistance, and (5) data and accountability systems. For early outreach, they highlighted the need to engage and focus on individual students, while providing them with clear expectations, feedback, and support. In essence, SHEEO (2003) noted that the early outreach should convince students that success is possible. They indicated that these efforts should occur alongside a rigorous curriculum with effective assessment systems that can be supported through quality teaching. They affirmed that the P-16 system can focus on quality teachers because the post-secondary system should effectively develop teachers that, in turn, will help the K-12 level and improve student success. Finally, they addressed the need for student financial assistance, as

well as the use of state data and accountability systems to track student records through each educational level or to assess the quality of teachers and school leaders.

Martinez (2005) identified similar efforts for high school reform that are well underway. She recognized the following factors as contributors to high school reform: (a) increased academic rigor, (b) personalized instruction, (c), supportive services, (d) reading and writing literacy skills, (e) assessments, (f) high-quality leaders, (g) highly qualified teachers, and (h) support for schools in need of improvement. A better understanding of these contributors is necessary for high school reform.

For example, with the academic rigor factor, Martinez (2005) noted that "states have begun to support this primarily through the provision of AP courses, AP exams, and dual-enrollment programs" (p. 6). These efforts are often combined with personalized instruction, which was referred to as a means of providing unique attention to each individual. Martinez (2005) also addressed smaller learning communities as effective reform within a high school. Within smaller learning communities, supportive services should include "more instructional or remedial time becomes complicated because many students work after school or during the summer or simply will not attend when programs are offered" (Martinez, 2005, p. 10). Of course, this points to the difficulty in creating effective reforms. For other aspects, such as literacy skills, assessments, quality leaders and teachers, as well as support for schools in need of improvement, the strategies are similar to those identified by SHEEO (2003). Martinez (2005) indicated that "the notion that teachers should have strong knowledge in the subjects they teach is intuitively logical and prompts little argument at the high school level" (p. 13). She affirmed that it is possible for schools to "redesign their governance structures, break into smaller schools, transform classroom pedagogy, and build partnerships and multiple pathways to postsecondary opportunities" (Martinez, 2005, p. 16). Therefore, the author primarily argued that reforms exist but have simply not been a priority at the high school level.

5.2 Reform among High Schools

Like Martinez's (2005) work, Huebner and Corbett (2004) focused on efforts toward school reform; they identified five high schools that were considered profiles of innovative models. Each school was used in the study because the "Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation partners with communities nationwide to start new small schools and convert existing schools into smaller ones" (Huebner & Corbett, 2004, p. 4). Considering such efforts, the study sought to identify what was happening at these particular schools, who they were educating, and how the students were doing. The key aspects identified for each school's success are noted below, as well as the report's overall findings.

For TechBoston Academy, it was found that personalization, autonomy, and partnerships were critical to its success. For Dayton Early College Academy, the success was attributed to aspects within the philosophy and advising structure, autonomy and flexibility, and leadership and support efforts. Within CICS Northtown Academy, key aspects included the presence of an articulated vision, effective structures, and quality faculty and staff. With Arrupe Jesuit High School, the key efforts were identified through its foundation, community and business support, and committed students. Lastly, for High Tech High, the faculty and staff, design principles, and the school's charter status were considered to be keys to the school's success. Even though some of the specific findings for success were slightly different among schools, the key components among them were similarly related. Further, the processes within the schools had specific aspects that were also identified in Martinez's (2005) work.

In addition to the individual findings within the schools, Huebner and Corbett (2004) addressed overall findings. They noted that schools were ethnically and socioeconomically diverse, with students of all abilities. Therefore, the report found that many students entered the schools performing below grade level but were still enrolled in a rigorous curriculum. Furthermore, schools creatively used supportive learning environments to foster students' efforts, so students were highly engaged in learning. Along with these findings, four elements to school success were identified through principal interviews. These elements included a strong faculty and staff, innovative school designs, an emphasis on effective teaching and curriculum, and flexibility in school governance. Consequently, the report showed that students at all of the schools were able to attain academic success. Thus, the results demonstrated that "it is possible to take action against the alarmingly high dropout

rate of high school students in the United States and properly prepare them for college" (Huebner & Corbett, 2004, p. 9).

Parallel to the critical keys to school success noted in the above report, the study by the Education Trust (2005) also highlighted characteristics of schools that effectively accelerate learning. The study specifically looked at the characteristics among high-impact schools, where these schools fashioned extraordinarily large growth among students who had entered significantly behind. The report found five areas that were consistent among high-impact schools—culture, academic core, support, teachers, and time and other resources. Within each of these areas, similarities and differences between high- and low-impact schools were addressed. Throughout the report, it was revealed that a focus on school success existed within the high-impact schools. This was evident through more deliberate school efforts, such as direct student support or planning, more flexibility within the school, high standards and consistencies, strong support for teachers, and an overall climate of success.

Therefore, the Education Trust (2005) noted that early warning systems were in place, and it was made clear that all stakeholders were involved in helping students succeed. Whether they were principals, counselors, teachers, or outside partnerships, everyone was involved. As a result, various reports have demonstrated that schools can effectively develop measures to attain school success (Corbett, 2004; Education Trust, 2005; Martinez, 2005). Each report identified schools, programs, and key efforts that have produced successful outcomes among students. The bottom line was clear—schools *do* have options for improved change, and there *are* models out there that can be followed.

5.3 State Efforts for Reform

In addition to specific high schools, various states have implemented P-16 systems that can be used as models toward P-16 efforts. Van de Water and Rainwater (2001) highlighted Georgia, Maryland, Missouri, and Oregon as states with P-16 initiatives. For example, with Georgia, they pointed to the development of a P-16 council to align standards, curriculum, and assessment, enhance teacher quality, and implement outreach programs. For Oregon, the report focused on the state's initiatives to align teacher preparation programs with K-12 performance standards, as well as on the development of their Proficiency-based Admissions Standards System (PASS). The PASS system aligned university admission standards with school improvement plans, which helped school systems to improve their curriculum and move away from a grades-only system.

Venezia et al. (2005) also identified Georgia and Oregon as models for reform, and additionally included New York and Florida. These authors noted that New York has a historically different structure than any other state, with New York's Board of Regents overseeing all of the state's education for the past 200 years. With Florida, they noted that all education levels are housed within the Department of Education. Van de Water and Rainwater (2001) stressed that improving achievement and expanding students' learning opportunities were commong goals for all of the states.

6 Recommendations

Five steps were identified by Van de Water and Rainwater (2001) for P-16 efforts as follows: (1) bring education leaders together, define the problem, and create a vision, (2) outline possible policy options, (3) build consensus for a P-16 system, (4) suggest solutions, and (5) continue consensus building. Because the P-16 concept involves connected educational systems, every stakeholder has a unique ability and position to contribute to P-16 initiatives. Particularly as educational leaders of higher education, teacher preparation programs and school leadership programs must aim to create an awareness of policy issues that exist among and within educational systems. Leaders can stimulate dialogues within their educational communities about the concept of P-16. They can help to inspire teachers, leaders, researchers, and others to be creative and to take risks to better connect the educational systems. Educational leaders must take the lead to create an interest in the use of alternative methods that can break the traditional educational settings. Additionally, few articles focus on P-16 systems or provide the basic ideas of its concept. More scholarly research and articles could create an awareness of the potential P-16 systems and help to disseminate information to

stakeholders among the educational systems. The greatest potential for P-16 alignment is individual student successes. However, a very desirable interim outcome is reform within each educational level that can lead to a dialogue and natural alignment among all educational systems.

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