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Connecting Schools and Colleges: More Rhetoric Than Reality

By MICHAEL KIRST

Most of the nation's eighth graders aspire to college. Unfortunately, the vast majority of them will not realize their ambition to complete their higher education and gain some advantage in the job market.

In my research since 1998, I have not focused on those students who seek acceptance at elite, selective institutions. Rather, I have concerned myself with the 80 percent of high-school graduates who attend what I call broad-access postsecondary institutions. (Nearly half of first-year students attend community colleges, and an additional 30 percent go to four-year institutions that accept all qualified applicants.) And I look back on the last decade with some gratification and much anxiety.

I have seen some, but not nearly enough, progress among high-school students when it comes to being ready to go to college and get their degrees. College completion rates are stagnant for recent high-school graduates. In California, only 24 percent of community-college students receive a vocational certificate or an associate degree — or transfer to a four-year institution within six years. At community colleges nationwide, more than 60 percent of students who enroll after high school end up taking at least one remedial course. In the California State University system, 56 percent of entering freshmen are in remediation.

Clearly, the connections between high schools and higher-education institutions are still not what they should be to help students prepare for college.

News-media attention to poor college preparation has grown significantly in the last decade. The policy agendas of various states have focused increasingly on college-transition problems, and some policy makers have proposed specific solutions. As many as 37 states have established "P-16" councils — groups of education, business, and community leaders charged with developing strategies to better coordinate, integrate, and improve education from preschool through college. The councils enable such decision makers to deliberate on college-transition issues, but few of the solutions deal with the magnitude of the problem or its multiple dimensions. Action beyond agenda setting and policy discussions has too often been shallow and limited.

Moreover, evaluation of new policies — both the successes and the failures — to determine what works has barely begun. And enhanced awareness of inadequate college preparation and completion is largely confined to government leaders and policy elites, with little impact on teachers or administrators at schools and colleges.

In 2005 I and my colleagues at the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education identified four state policy levers that are necessary for true reform to occur:

- Standards alignment between high school and college for courses, content, and assessment.
- Student financial support and incentives for higher-education institutions to provide better student-support services.

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- A data system that tracks the progress of individual students from pre-K through college. → Cal Pass
- Accountability measures that link secondary schools and colleges to student outcomes, like the completion of college.

How far along are most states in putting such policies and programs in place?

The most progress has been made in aligning high-school and college standards, led by groups like Achieve Inc., established by governors and business leaders. Some states — such as Georgia and Texas — are using, or considering the use of, course assessments at the end of high school and other means of aligning curricula with college courses. Achieve has also worked to help establish high-school graduation requirements and develop other programs to ease the school-college transition in 31 states.

But broad-access postsecondary institutions rely on placement tests more than admissions scores like the ACT or the SAT, and few statewide secondary-school assessments are aligned with those placement tests or the content of first-year college courses. Colleges use many different types of placement assessments, and most high-school students do not know what those assessments will cover.

Meanwhile, *Education Week's* "Quality Counts 2008," which grades states' policies and outcomes, has found that just 15 states have a definition of college readiness, and only three (New York, Rhode Island, and Texas) require all students to finish a college-preparatory curriculum to graduate. Many state governments have chosen the easy route of simply specifying course labels to be taken, and they do not deal with content within the specified courses. Further, the hard work of getting secondary-school teachers to work with their higher-education counterparts on subject-matter course articulation between the 10th grade and the sophomore year in college has barely begun.

The lack of headway on financial policies is even more discouraging. Although more states are focusing student aid on needy students who complete college-preparation courses, too much federal and state money still goes to students who are so unprepared that they have little chance of college success. Meanwhile, financial-aid applications are so complicated that they make the standard income-tax form look easy.

Financial aid is not designed well for 75 percent of the community-college students who attend part time and live off the campus. It is insufficient, complex, and hard for part-time community-college students to obtain. They receive less money than students who attend four-year institutions, the forms must be filled out before they decide to go to community college, and there are not enough financial-aid counselors for evening students.

In addition, the use of state financial incentives to encourage colleges and universities to improve student outcomes has been largely unexplored. Right now, for example, the California Legislature appropriates money to the state's community colleges for keeping students through the third week of a course, but it requires no other student outcomes. It's less expensive for most broad-access public institutions to recruit new students than to provide services to retain struggling ones. And, unlike elementary and secondary education, the spending pattern within postsecondary systems and institutions is mostly a black box, so we do not even know where to start. It is difficult even to find out how much money each institution spends on remediation.

for outcomes
to make it to week #3.

How can we devise a K-16 state-finance system that supports efforts to lessen the need for student remediation and stimulates higher-education institutions to help more students obtain their degrees? In theory, high schools and colleges could work together to design outcomes to meet accountability targets, like the need for less remediation. They could then be financially rewarded for collaborating to produce those outcomes. But the finance policy gap helps undermine such accountability efforts.

As for data systems that track the progress of students, Florida has a complete system that follows students from kindergarten through graduate school. Most states are making significant data improvements — partly with federal money — but are not close to what Florida has accomplished.

Underlying all these difficulties are the deeply rooted policy differences between the secondary and postsecondary systems. Thus, the future is murky, with both good and bad scenarios possible. A positive future would see education leaders at every level and policy makers working simultaneously on all four policy levers outlined above, as well as a federal and state commitment to build teacher capacity to align instruction across the entire educational system. A more-negative scenario would be a process of slow incrementalism that deals only with parts of the problem in an incoherent manner.

Perhaps a focus on secondary-school improvement in the forthcoming No Child Left Behind reauthorization will galvanize faster and more-inclusive progress. At present, states have an incentive to keep secondary-school assessments below the college level because more students will be able to become proficient at that lower level by 2014. A different federal policy could reward states with college-level assessments by extending the proficiency deadline past the required date of

2014.

College leaders should encourage policy makers to consider that approach, as well as continue to work on both the state and federal levels to progress in the four key areas that I've outlined. We need to go well past the rhetoric if we are to truly improve the vital connections between high school and college.

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