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POINT OF VIEW

A Coordinated Effort to Prepare Students for College

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In education, consensus is rare. When consensus does emerge on the nature of a problem and on specific, achievable steps toward improvement, we should all sit up and take notice.

Governors from 45 states, corporate executives, policy experts, leaders from both secondary and higher education, and representatives from a wide range of philanthropic and other nonprofit organizations have all agreed on a common policy goal: making the high-school diploma a true indicator of readiness for success in both college and work. The requirements of today's economy have made the old distinction between academic and career skills obsolete. Young people need the same fundamental skills whether they pursue college or work after high school, and most will eventually need at least some postsecondary education.

Significant progress has already been made. Governors in 26 states have joined the American Diploma Project Network, a national program that helps states take concrete steps toward making the high-school diploma count. The associations that we lead — the American Council on Education, the National Association of System Heads, State Higher Education Executive Officers, and Achieve (an organization founded by governors and business leaders to help states raise academic achievement) are working to promote higher-education involvement in the ADP network. Additional states are participating in the National Governors Association Honor States program with similar aims.

Yet such work requires statewide buy-in and cooperation between secondary and higher education, with colleges playing a major role. There is a mandate for change, but states cannot make progress without the active support of higher education. Our organizations have a variety of activities planned over the next two years to help college leaders learn more about this reform agenda and create needed changes. (Please see http://www.acenet.edu/programs/advancing)

What, specifically, do we think must be done to reach the goal?

College and high-school leaders must work together to align standards. Schools in every state have established academic standards that have become the foundation for curriculum, testing, and accountability systems from elementary through high school. Unfortunately, few states have carefully anchored those standards in the skills required for success in college. That is beginning to change. In 16 states, high-school teachers and college professors have begun to collaborate on new academic standards that will prepare high-school graduates to succeed in college or the workplace, and more states will start work this academic year. Ideally, that should happen in all subjects, but there is widespread agreement that math and English are the linchpins.

College faculty members may initially resist the notion of a common set of entry-level standards across institutions. But once they begin to compare course syllabi and textbooks for first-year math

and English courses, they typically find that 90 percent of the material is common to all institutions and that the remaining 10 percent can be reconciled.

States must raise high-school graduation standards. Eleven states require a set of college-preparatory courses for graduation, and nine others are working to do that. Public-university systems can reinforce state efforts by collaborating with school officials to determine the right set of courses for success in higher education, and then base requirements for admission upon those courses.

Statewide standards must drive not only course work but also assessment. Leaders in a growing number of states are working to build more-ambitious statewide high-school assessments to better signal college readiness. Five states will administer the ACT or SAT to all high-school students, typically during the junior year. Nine states are entering into a compact to develop a common Algebra II "end of course" assessment that will indicate readiness for college-level math. The California State University System and the California Department of Education worked together to add questions to the state's 11th-grade English and math assessments so those tests could also be used as college-placement exams. In each of those cases, students who don't score well find out early and have the opportunity to fill in any gaps in college preparation while still in high school. College leaders can and should support test-development efforts and add credibility to the exams by using them for placement decisions.

High schools and colleges must communicate results to each other. For high schools to improve, they need information from colleges about how well students are performing, particularly in their first-year course work. Likewise, by sharing their challenges and successes in carrying out a college-ready curriculum, secondary educators can help college professors and administrators refine first-year courses, as well as improve teacher preparation and professional development.

Although colleges in some states are deeply involved in this agenda, those in many others are not. If the goal is so clear and has such a high degree of consensus, why aren't all higher-education institutions on board? We see four reasons: College leaders don't see the "payoff" for their own institutions; they think the agenda is irrelevant to their institution's mission; they believe their work with local schools is sufficient; or they fear common standards for placement into credit-bearing courses will limit institutional flexibility and autonomy.

What is the payoff? If students leave high school certified as ready for entry-level math and English courses, the rate of remediation will drop precipitously, reducing costs and increasing the likelihood that students will persist and graduate. In addition, governors and legislators appreciate college leaders' contributing to an important statewide policy agenda, and that appreciation can sometimes lead to additional financial or political support.

Is this agenda relevant to all institutions? Open-access institutions may assume that improving high-school preparation is not relevant because they admit students regardless of the high-school courses they complete. Conversely, selective institutions may conclude that it is irrelevant because their students typically have completed a college-preparatory curriculum and do not require remediation. Independent institutions may not see their stake in this state policy issue.

While it is true that tying high-school courses, graduation requirements, and assessments to college-readiness standards will not and cannot standardize student achievement, it will improve the average. Open-access institutions will still admit students who have not met the new standards, but the number of students who require remediation should decline. Selective institutions will admit students who have exceeded the standard, but they will have more qualified students in their applicant pool. Independent colleges need to participate only as they deem appropriate, but they share an interest with their public-sector peers in a better-prepared applicant pool and reduced

need for remediation.

Is a systemic approach necessary? Most colleges operate outreach programs, and education faculty members typically work closely with a few local schools or districts. Yet work with local schools, while important, is no substitute for a statewide agenda. Even the most well-conceived single-institution efforts can have only marginal impact when curricula and assessments are not organized statewide around a common understanding of the skills and knowledge that students need to prepare for life after high school.

What about over-standardization? Agreement on a baseline standard of readiness does not restrict institutional admissions, grading, or curricular decisions. Nor does it limit the freedom of faculty members to design courses as they see fit. In fact, if more students complete high school with at least a baseline level of college readiness, institutions should have more freedom to innovate because they will not be required to devote money and faculty time to remedial course work.

Obviously, significant high-school improvement will be neither quick nor easy. Political leaders will change, and new leaders must be persuaded to maintain the momentum for improvement. College and school leaders may find it difficult to work together on a common agenda when the dynamics of the budgetary process put them in a zero-sum game.

Yet while the political and financial challenges are formidable, there is reason for optimism. This agenda is unambiguous and widely embraced. It has bipartisan political support, the active engagement of the National Governors Association, and the support of business leaders (led by Bill Gates, chairman of Microsoft Corporation), who are using their money and bully pulpits to keep high schools near the top of the public agenda. Moreover, a continued slide in America's global competitiveness, which depends on an educated work force, is unacceptable to the public.

David S. Spence, president of the Southern Regional Education Board and an architect of reform efforts, summed up the crucial need for higher education's involvement at a Wingspread conference last year: "I don't think the high schools can go any further without higher education being clear about [its] college-readiness standards. It's time for higher education to step up to the plate and be absolutely clear what it means, across a whole state, to be college-ready."

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