

As it enters the twenty-first century,

the United States is approaching universal access to higher education; fully 75 percent of high school graduates now go on to some form of postsecondary education within two years. This achievement is greatly tempered, however, by the fact that many of these students arrive on campus underprepared for college-level study. For example, fewer than half of the students who enter college directly from high school complete even a minimally defined college preparatory program. Once in college, 53 percent of all students must take remedial courses. Those students requiring the most remedial work are the least likely to persist and graduate. Clearly, access is not enough.

Moreover, the common sense goal of aligning the expectations of the high school graduate with those of the entering college student is made more difficult by legitimate concerns about the general direction in which K-12 reform is headed. Many in the higher education community distrust the prevailing discourse of accountability—especially as it is embodied both in federal “No Child Left Behind” legislation and in many state-based K-12 reforms. And even as secondary education in the United States rushes headlong into standards-based reform, new research—into the links between high-stakes testing and student achievement, for example—is emerging that should strain the credulity of even the most test-happy of policymakers.

The goal of a seamless educational system must be to provide all students with an education of lasting value. As important as it is, articulation between school and college must be situated within a larger vision of the kind of intentional learners students must become to thrive in the complex, interdependent, diverse world of the twenty-first century. In other words, the challenge is not just for secondary education to better prepare students for college but for all educational sectors together to prepare students for the twenty-first century.

To meet this challenge, undergraduate education is undergoing a dramatic reorganization. From learning-centered innovations on campuses of all kinds, one can discern the emergence across higher education of a broad reform movement, the emergence of what AAC&U is calling a “New Academy.” This New Academy is the site of praxis for a practical and engaged liberal education. In this dynamic process of becoming, the New

Academy is confronting its own questions of alignment as it addresses issues associated with student transfer, as it forges closer connections across the disciplines and between general education and the major. It also is facing significant challenges. One with obvious implications for school-college alignment has to do with changing staffing patterns.

It is important to acknowledge the impact on school-college alignment efforts of the trend explored in the previous issue of *Peer Review*: undergraduate education’s increasing reliance on contingent faculty. K-12’s under-preparation of students, combined with higher education’s over-reliance on contingent faculty, may set the stage for a train wreck with devastating and predictable consequences for student attrition, retention, and completion. It is almost certain that the courses in which these under-prepared students will be enrolled during their first two years of college will be taught by contingent faculty. These faculty are, for example, less likely to spend time with students out of class, less able to advise students, less available to write letters of recommendation, and less likely to be at the table as curricula are (re)designed. This means that the students most likely to benefit from increased faculty involvement are being paired with the faculty least likely to be involved. And if, as many think, we are trending toward a two-tiered system and a formal separation of the teaching and research functions, K-12 may well be seeking to connect with a higher education system that is itself fragmenting.

How then to align with an academy in transition? Successful alignment, and successful articulation, should begin with a clear and shared understanding of what constitutes college readiness. Regrettably, many of the current efforts at school-college alignment are proceeding without such an understanding. This issue of *Peer Review* provides a critical overview of selected ongoing alignment efforts and makes the case for more active involvement on the part of higher education in shaping them. The stakes for the New Academy, as for the students it hopes to prepare for the twenty-first century, are very high indeed.

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