

Connecting the Dots: Linking High Schools and Postsecondary Education to Increase Student Success

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State and federal governments have launched an ambitious, unprecedented attempt to specify and measure student learning in the public schools. To do so, essentially every state has developed content standards that specify what students should know and be able to do in a broad range of subject areas. Federal requirements will result in all states having assessment systems to measure those standards at grades three through eight and at least once between grades ten and twelve. Two-dozen states have linked their tests to high school graduation, or plan to do so. Where tests are not tied to graduation, they are built into school accountability systems. Students and educators alike are paying attention to these new standards and assessments.

This process of “raising the bar” began in earnest in the early 1990s, when national organizations released model content standards. From these standards flowed state standards and assessments, then state accountability systems. These standards and assessments vary widely in terms of the specific content and the challenge level of each. Comparisons of state-by-state performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) to the percentage of students in each state deemed to have met state standards illustrates this variability.

Will standards-based educational reform result in more students being prepared to succeed in college? Without some sort of plan to connect the two systems, the answer is “who knows?” As standards and assessments were developed over the past decade, higher

education faculty were either not at the table, or were there to provide their opinions on what K-12 students should know. They were not asked to connect high school preparation more closely with college success. No state created educational standards and assessments for the express purpose of increasing college enrollments or success.

This is not to say states do not care about this issue. The unspoken assumption often is that college preparation doesn’t need fixing or that, by raising standards, all students benefit. Both of these assumptions continue to be largely unsubstantiated. As others have pointed out, the quality of college preparation is largely a hit-or-miss proposition. With the exception of students at the nation’s most selective universities, large numbers of students struggle to succeed in entry-level college courses. Many end up in remedial courses. No evidence exists that student readiness to succeed in college is improving overall, and some evidence suggests it is slipping slightly. College completion rates, for example, have not increased substantially in the past twenty years.

The Role of Higher Education

Why is any of this a problem for American colleges and universities? High school teachers are under greater pressure to teach to these standards and tests. Even in traditional college prep classes, the curriculum can be subtly (or not so subtly) reshaped to meet the demands of state standards. Students come to believe they are “proficient” or “advanced” based on their state test scores.

As all of these changes are occurring, higher education is acting largely as a spectator under the mistaken assumption that college-going students won't be much affected by them. Higher education needs to engage with secondary education in an ongoing dialogue and discussion on what should be expected of students. A few states have begun these conversations, but none has yet institutionalized these understandings into an assessment system that yields data for high school graduation on one hand, and college admission and placement on the other. Oregon is getting close. Texas and California are developing tests they hope can achieve this goal. Maryland spent considerable time and effort to create end-of-course examinations that could conceivably achieve this goal. The New York Regents Examination has long been considered a potential tool for this purpose. Massachusetts is looking at the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) to ascertain if it could yield such information.

Most of this activity is occurring without reference to any explicit set of expectations for university success. In the absence of consistent, clearly stated postsecondary academic content standards, states and even individual high schools remain free to set their own. Who benefits and who suffers due to the lack of such standards? As is all too often the case, those who are already disadvantaged are in the greatest danger of being left off the standards conveyor belt that is supposed to lift all students to higher levels. Standards that link to nothing create

another potential dead-end. For those with the knowledge and means to decipher the actual route to college, state standards and assessments pose less of a potential sidetrack. For those who must do as they are told and focus on high school assessments, the prospects for admission to (and, more importantly, success in) higher education are not necessarily increased.

Challenges

Each system, K-12 and higher education, has an obligation to articulate its expectations and requirements. Here are some of the challenges facing each system:

- Colleges and universities have been reluctant to enter into the standards discussion and seem content to remain at arms-length.
- High school teachers often insist they know what is required for college admission and success, even when they have little concrete evidence that this is so.
- Entry-level college courses often function as the de facto admissions process, screening those who can pass them from those who can't.
- High schools remain wedded to an obsolete model of comprehensiveness that means they do several things poorly instead of one thing well.
- Higher education institutions, which have shown the ability to be highly adaptive in certain aspects and areas when necessary, have shown little inclination to revamp the general education component of their curriculum to align better with high schools.

- High schools have shown much less improvement relative to state standards than have elementary schools and are under increasing pressure to "reinvent" themselves.
- Many postsecondary institutions would prefer to rank-order high schools and perpetuate the status quo rather than work toward systemic improvement of high schools.
- No formal mechanism exists to coordinate standard-setting so that standards align between high school and college.

A few comments on each of these points is called for.

By remaining aloof from the standards setting and assessment development process, higher education does avoid getting dragged into what has all the appearances of a nasty political fight. Who needs to take on a new problem like this? The only difficulty with this logic is that, in the absence of higher education's voice in the conversation, the standards debate will rage on interminably. Once someone reaches a standard, he or she is supposed to go on to something else. In our society, that something is generally postsecondary education or work. While work-related standards are necessary, college-related standards will affect more students in the foreseeable future. With two-thirds of high school graduates going on directly to higher education and up to 75 percent engaging in postsecondary learning within five years of graduation, college standards are the logical complement to high school standards. Higher education cannot avoid its responsibility here indefinitely.

Meanwhile, some high school teachers resist state standards because they assert that they interfere with preparing students for college. While many high school teachers do an excellent job readying students for college, it is unclear how any individual teacher knows he or she is doing the right thing. Most rely on textbooks that are not articulated with college instruction and may even contain subject matter at odds with college course content. College preparation continues to emphasize coverage over depth, although many professors assert that students who delve deeply into fewer areas and develop greater understanding of and stronger skills in reading and writing, problem solving and critical thinking, do better in college than those who get A's in high school but don't develop these skills.

When these students arrive at college, having met or exceeded all entrance requirements and believing they are well prepared, they may end up confronting a course designed to sort those who are college-ready from those who are merely admitted. This is perhaps more true in mathematics and the sciences, but examples can be found in any discipline. One effect is to increase the freshman dropout rate. Another more insidious outcome is to cut students off from careers in whole fields. Having failed to complete the first course in a sequence, the student is effectively barred from any major requiring that subject. Witness the relative shortage of American college graduates in mathematics and the sciences as evidence of this phenomenon. Embedding college success

standards in entry-level college courses and aligning high school standards with them would help alleviate the problem.

The American high school is struggling to find its identity. The current organizational structure was promoted by a university president, James Bryant Conant. It is based on sorting students into tracks. The presumption that even a moderately large high school can provide distinctly different programs to different types of students is increasingly difficult to defend. Traditional vocational education programs cannot match the current complexity of the economy or of the skills required for most technical occupations. Community colleges are better suited to this task. The general education track is truly a road to nowhere. The college preparation program, as noted earlier, operates on good intentions and hope. The best hope for a new organizing principle for high schools is a strong core curriculum for all students combined with acceleration for all students as they demonstrate they can benefit from it. Acceleration is for the purpose of deepening and strengthening core academic skills through challenging content, not merely covering more material. Connections with workplace training and postsecondary education create opportunities for students to leave high school as they demonstrate they are ready. Higher education must be ready to help define a core curriculum that enables all students to make successful transitions to college or technical training.

Few brave souls venture into the thicket of college and university general

education requirements, and those who do emerge with scars. This most uniquely American aspect of the college curriculum has become overrun by complex requirements tied to literally hundreds of course titles. It is hard to say what the general education program of study manifests intellectually or otherwise. This lack of clarity would perhaps be of less concern if incoming students were being placed appropriately. Instead, the requirements result in some students repeating much of what they have already learned, while others struggle to keep up with material that is far too complex. A commitment to be clear and consistent on the prerequisite knowledge and skills required for success in entry-level general education courses would enable the creation of effective placement procedures that could even motivate high school students to continue to work hard and achieve throughout their senior year.

School Reform

As state testing systems begin to yield longitudinal data, it is becoming clear that high schools are not improving relative to state goals at an acceptable rate. Although many explanations for this phenomenon have been offered, states are putting more pressure on high schools to reinvent themselves. As noted above, a high school core curriculum is one potential idea, although not necessarily a popular one. The high school reform-du-jour is the "small learning community:" dividing large high schools up into smaller schools-within-schools. This may yet prove to be an effective reform strategy. However,

here again, higher education is not a partner in this redesign process. These learning communities are being designed and implemented with only the most general notions of how they relate to college success. They will, in all likelihood, be influenced by state assessment requirements. Another nascent model for high school reform, the middle college high school, holds greater promise, but it absolutely requires more direct involvement and engagement across the high school-college boundary.

All of this high school redesign will prove challenging to traditional college practices of ranking high schools, formally or informally, in terms of their academic quality. This tradition is more prevalent among universities that draw regionally or nationally. The problem is that the correlation between “good” high schools and socioeconomic success is strong. For high schools that send few students on to these selective universities, it is essentially impossible to show that more of their students might be capable of succeeding. A closer connection between state assessments and university admissions criteria could allow students to demonstrate ability, independent of their high school of origin. Admissions officers could compare a student’s performance on state tests to all other students in the state. This could provide a potential advantage to students from high schools that historically send fewer students on to selective colleges. This method might also offer an alternative to SAT/ACT scores by replacing them with curriculum-based measures. But state tests

must be linked with college success standards for this strategy to work.

Standards for Success

These trends, practices, and policies are historical artifacts of an American educational system that has always been divided between high school and college. Many forces are converging to enforce a stronger nexus between the two, including a few efforts underway in the higher education community. One example is a project sponsored by the Association of American Universities and The Pew Charitable Trusts, called Standards for Success. It has developed a set of standards for success in entry-level university courses. The project has also analyzed high school tests from twenty-five states. These two products show the expectations each system holds for students and the alignment between systems.

The Knowledge and Skills for University Success standards produced by this project identify specific content knowledge in six disciplinary areas (English, math, science, social sciences, second languages, and the arts) along with a range of more general cognitive skills that cut across subject areas. The content knowledge standards are written in a taxonomic format similar to that found in K-12 standards documents, with several levels of detail and specificity. The cognitive and cross-disciplinary skills—such as writing, critical reasoning, analytic thinking, and inquisitiveness—are described in a narrative section that illustrates their importance and uses.

These standards will be distributed in two formats: a brochure listing the standards and a CD-ROM in which the standards are linked to examples of work from students in entry-level university courses that illustrate the challenge level associated with each standard. Copies of the document and the disc will be sent to every high school in the country as well as to state education departments and standard-setting organizations. The goal is to provide those in secondary education with a reference point against which high school standards and assessments can be compared. No such set of standards exists currently. Using these standards, state education departments can determine if their tests align well with preparation for success in college. High school teachers can consider whether their curriculum is consistent with college success as well. High school students can gauge the distance they have to travel to be ready for college and can gear their efforts in high school accordingly.

The challenge faced by this project and other similar efforts is to engage higher education faculty and administrators to integrate academic content standards into admissions criteria and undergraduate courses, and to convince state education officials that higher education is serious about becoming a real partner in standards-driven education reform. Now is an excellent time for forward-looking members of the postsecondary community to grapple with the issues presented here with the goal of increasing success for all students, in high school and college. ■