OCCRL office of community college research and leadership

In Brief

THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE'S ROLE IN P-16 EDUCATION REFORM

By Erika Rasch

Introduction

For at least 20 years, America has been engaged in the process of school reform, the most recent of which is the P-16 education reform movement. However, the phenomenon of two- and four-year colleges working closely with schools is clearly not new. "For much of the 19th century, higher educators not only prepared the teachers for pre-collegiate schools, but they also dictated the curriculum, issued the tests, approved secondary school courses, and, of course, decided who would be allowed to proceed into postsecondary education" (Haycock, 1994, p. 17). Somewhere between then and now, a divide developed between the educational levels. The result has been a lack of collaboration among educational sectors, along with frequent competition for scarce resources. However, efforts to bridge the educational divide are beginning to occur through P-16 education initiatives, with community colleges playing an increasingly important role

Underpinnings of the P-16 Movement

No single issue or event can be attributed with inspiring the P-16 education reform movement. Instead, the movement seems to have been initiated through a combination of external and internal forces, including the changing educational landscape, a growing concern about the quality and effectiveness of public education, increasing awareness of the advantages of system-wide collaboration, and the need for a more highly skilled and diverse workforce (Haycock, 1998).

A Changing Educational Landscape

The educational landscape has changed dramatically over the last five decades. Callan (1998) noted that, while public school enrollments rose rapidly during the first half of the 20th century, massive enrollment growth occurred in America's colleges and universities during the second half of the century. Growth at all levels placed pressure on the system to continue to deliver high quality education for all students, particularly at the K-12 levels. On the postsecondary level, the passage of federal legislation such as the 1944 GI Bill, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and federal financial aid initiatives granted new groups of students— many of whom were older and more diverse— access to college for the first time.

The outcome, as explained by Callan (1998), was a "friendly divorce" (p. 51) beginning in the 1960s between secondary and postsecondary education, as college and university educators and administrators were forced to concentrate less on connections with elementary and secondary schools and more on challenges developing within their own institutions. Caught in the middle of the divorce were community colleges. At their beginning, many community colleges were associated with secondary education and developed as extensions of local secondary schools. However, during the 1960s and '70s, when community college systems grew rapidly in most states, community colleges began separating from high schools and identifying themselves as distinct postsecondary institutions. Underlying the separation was the belief that having a mission and curriculum distinctly separate from high school was important to the community college's survival as a higher education institution. Even so, by the mid 1980s, the separation between K-12 and postsecondary education was increasingly seen as problematic, creating renewed interest in cooperation between the two sectors. This was further driven by policymakers looking for increased efficiency and by corporate leaders interested in securing a more highly trained workforce.

A Concern for Quality

A Nation At Risk (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) brought widespread attention to problems existing within the K-12 educational system. Since that time, other scholars (for example Clark, 1988; Darling-Hammond, 1999; Gross, 1988; Kulpa, 1996) have noted problems, not only within elementary and secondary education, but also in higher education.

The report depicted a crisis in public education, calling attention to a mélange of problems— increasing illiteracy rates; low rankings of American students as compared to students from other countries; and declining scores on the College Board's Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). Pressured from many constituents to revamp and reinvent public education, elementary and secondary educators began working together to design a more seamless education system, although the reformed model ended at the twelfth grade (Haycock, 1994).

The notable absence of higher education in educational reform efforts raised eyebrows as college enrollments and costs increased over the past two decades. Until the organization of a series of school-college collaborations in the mid to late 1980s, the higher education system played a limited role in reform policy discussions (Haycock, 1994; Timpane, 1999). A major impetus to new reform strategies was the recognition that K-12 and higher education were "in fundamental ways all one system with countless interdependencies" (Haycock, p. 20), which were working independently of one another (Consortium for Policy Research in Education, 2000; Hodgkinson, 1985).

Appropriately, it became an accepted principle that higher education and K-12 education were so intertwined that large-scale reform in K-12 could not occur without higher education's support (Haycock, 1994; Haycock, 1996; Hodgkinson, 1999; Kleiman, 2001; Timpane, 1999). The problems generated by isolated systems such as conflicting standards for students, placement exam inconsistency and intensive remediation, and unequal opportunities for different groups of students clearly had to be addressed through partnerships (Consortium for Policy Research in Education, 2000).

A Highly Skilled Workforce

The need for a more highly trained and diverse workforce has resulted in an increasingly prominent business presence within the school reform partnership model. Corporate downsizing, resulting from economic pressures brought about by rapid technological change and globalization, caused businesses to regard education as a critical aspect of industrial and economic competitiveness (Haycock, 1998). Additionally, the need for more highly skilled workers increased the desirability of a postsecondary degree. Today many workers need an associate's degree or higher to maintain a standard of living that not too long ago required only a high school diploma (Consortium for Policy Research in Education, 2000; Kleiman, 2001; Pierce, 2001).

As a result, several federal initiatives have focused on providing high skill postsecondary career and technical education to traditionally non-college bound students. The Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act (reauthorized in 1998) directed federal dollars towards the development and operation of *tech prep* or *2+2 programs*, and the School to Work Opportunities Act of 1994 allowed high school students to receive preparation for college and careers through career academies, youth apprenticeships, and other models (Orr & Bragg, 2001; Haycock, 1998). Community colleges, which are oriented towards occupational and technical career preparation, have been the postsecondary sector most highly engaged in these initiatives.

The Response: Greater School-College Collaboration

In addition to federal policies facilitative of P-16, a growing concern about the lack of alignment between high school standards and student preparedness for college resulted in the establishment of the Education Trust to generate interest among colleges and universities in K-12 reform efforts (Chenoweth, 2000). In 1991, the Pew Charitable Trusts and the Education Trust developed the Compacts for Student Success Initiative (Brown, 1994). This collaborative effort, which developed from the Boston Compact, a school-business-higher education collaboration, encouraged colleges and universities to "move toward a more systemic way of thinking" (Brown, 1994, p. 26) about university and college relationships with high schools.

Haycock (1994) described the work of K-16 councils as "a vehicle to pull together disparate reform impulses- kindergarten through college- into a more coherent whole" (p. 21). The two fundamental ideas behind K-16 councils and many other P-16 education initiatives were the "creation of systemic reform strategies across the education continuum" and the "radical" belief that "both K-12 and postsecondary education need[ed] to reassess what they [were] doing in order to have a bigger impact on the educational success of a much larger number of students" (Brown, 1994, p. 28).

K-16 partnerships (now more commonly called P-16 reform) try to address the long-standing disconnect between secondary and postsecondary education by espousing some commonly held principles. For one, the P-16 model promotes the interdependency of the different levels of the educational system. According to Van Der Water and Rainwater (2001), many proponents of the K-16 model make reference to the need to recognize the interdependency and common goals among preschool, elementary, secondary and postsecondary education. Originally conceived in *All One System*, Hodgkinson (1985) described a seamless system made up of interlinked layers building upon each other. The philosophy behind this pioneering model suggested that gaps between levels could weaken the whole system.

Originally beginning with kindergarten, the K-16 structure has been expanded. With new brain research asserting that half of what a person learns over a lifetime is learned before kindergarten (Hodgkinson, 1999), new interest in including pre-kindergarten education (P) into the continuum emerged during the 1990s. In addition, the increasing commitment to graduate education and lifelong learning has extended the continuum to P-20 and beyond. The current P-16

initiative in Illinois emphasizes not only teacher preparation but also teacher professional development and school administrator development (meaning in most cases graduate or continuing education courses). What began as K-16 reform is now defined as anything from pre-school through graduate and professional education.

How Is P-16 Education Reform Being Implemented?

Unlike past school and college partnerships, most of which occurred through local consortia, state and federal policies provide the primary impetus for using P-16 reform strategies to address timely educational issues and goals (Callan, 1998; Haycock, 1998; Orr & Bragg, 2001; Tafel & Eberhart, 1999). Approximately 24 states have established formal P-16 education systems, most of which were initiated in the last five years (Education Commission of the States, 2002).

A 50-state survey conducted by Tafel and Eberhart (1999) found that many states use the issue of teacher quality as the point of entry into the P-16 model, although many other issues fall under the P-16 education umbrella, including expanded access to early learning; smoothing transitions from one level of learning to the next; closing the achievement gap between white and minority students; improving teacher recruitment, preparation, and professional development; strengthening the relationship between local and educational communities; creating better opportunities for students in the final two years of high school; and, improving the educational curriculum through content alignment, course articulation, and dual credit courses (Kirst, 1998; Van de Water and Rainwater; 2001).

Key issues in which community colleges have played a leadership role include accelerated learning, especially through programs like tech prep and dual credit (Schuetz, 2000) and teacher education through the strengthening of the paraprofessional teaching degree and the development of Associate of Arts in Teaching (AAT) programs. With critical teacher shortages in some teaching fields and geographic areas, AAT programs are expected to play a key role in more quickly preparing future teachers, including recruiting more diverse individuals into the teacher pipeline.

An Integral Role for Community Colleges

While community colleges have an integral role to play in P-16 education reform, their involvement has not been recognized in the literature as much as that of other higher education sectors. According to Venezia et al. (2003), "two-year institutions are not studied much by researchers, and are often not major players when states develop education reforms" (p. 26). Nonetheless, community colleges are actively involved in many P-16 reform initiatives in Illinois, and all indications suggest their role will continue to grow.

Community colleges have taken leadership to enhance educational quality through several P-16 education initiatives. Through dual credit arrangements between high schools and community colleges, high school students earn high school and college credits. Dual credit courses offer access to college level learning to a wider range of students, an opportunity to provide better academic and technical opportunities for students in the final two years of high school, and decreased time to degree and postsecondary education costs (Boswell, 2001). Dual credit courses have also encouraged more collaboration among secondary and postsecondary faculty. A study by Rasch (2002) found clear examples in Illinois and in other states of ways that state P-16 goals were addressed through the offering of dual credit courses and closer alignment between secondary and postsecondary curricula.

In addition, many community colleges in Illinois such as Lake Land Community College require students enrolling in college-level transfer courses to take a college placement test. Administering the placement test during high school allows students who are not prepared for college-level studies to be identified early, before entering college. These test results can be used to get students into early intervention programs that prepare them to enter college with the math, reading and writing competencies that they need.

In addition, community colleges are working to help ease articulation to four-year colleges and universities. As one example, community colleges have worked to develop teacher preparation models that allow students to get a full two years of teacher preparation at the community college without losing credits toward the Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree. The University of Illinois is working with the Illinois Community College Board, the Illinois Board of Higher Education, and other community college and four-year university representatives to develop a model general education curriculum for use in teacher education articulation agreements between 2- and 4-year colleges. Also in an effort to help more students matriculate to a four-year university, several community colleges and four-year universities (Eastern Illinois University and Parkland College, for example) have developed agreements that allow associate degree students to remain on the community college campus to finish the bachelor's degree.

These are only a few examples of the ways that community colleges are involved with K-12 schools and four-year universities in P-16 education activities. Clearly, these initiatives could not be as successful without the full participation of community colleges. With their reputation as open-access, learner-centered institutions, community colleges are recognized by Boswell (2001), Palmer (2000); Pierce (2002), Venezia et al. (2003) and others as the sector best suited to bridge the perceived barriers between the K-12 and higher education systems and to prepare students for the more advanced technical skills that are required in today's workplace.

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The Author

Erika Rasch is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and may be reached at erasch@uiuc.edu.

The Office of Community College Research and Leadership (OCCRL) was established in 1989 at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. *Our mission is to provide research, leadership, and service to community college leaders and assist in improving the quality of education in the Illinois community college system.* Projects of this office are supported by the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB), and are closely coordinated with the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE).

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University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
College of Education
51 Gerty Drive, CRC Room 129 · Champaign, IL 61820
217-244-9390 · Fax: 217-244-0851
Website: http://occrl.ed.uiuc.edu