



**DIANNE WRIGHT, PH.D.** teaches courses in Higher Education Leadership at the master's and doctoral levels at Florida Atlantic University (FAU). Her research interests include higher education policy; finance and governance, including school/university collaboration, with a particular emphasis on K-20 perspectives; accountability; and strategic planning. She is editor of the *Journal for the Advancement for Educational Research (JAER)*.



**IRA BOGOTCH**, professor, teaches school leadership courses at the master's and doctoral levels at Florida Atlantic University (FAU). His research interests, in addition to following the adolescent lives inside of the FAU High School, are the principalship, social justice, socio-cultural influences on leadership and school-based management. He serves on numerous editorial boards and is the associate editor of the *International Journal of Leadership in Education*.

By Dianne Wright, Ph.D. and Professor Ira Bogotch

# High School: Erasing Borders

## Background

Over the last several years there have been numerous calls for reforming high school to college transitions (Maeroff, Callan, and Usdan, 2001, Kirst and Venezia 2001a, 2001b; Kirst and Venezia, 2004, Houseman 2005, Kirst and Venezia 2006; Finn 2006, Haycock 2006, Jacobson 2006, and Katz 2006). In 2000–2001, the American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF) and the National Commission on the High School Senior Year respectively called for a re-thinking of how students moved from secondary to postsecondary education. A widely-discussed initiative was dual or concurrent enrollment, or as referred to by the AYPF during its 2004 roundtable discussion, “secondary postsecondary learning option, (SPLO).” Dual enrollment allows high school students to enroll in college courses. Participation in dual enrollment programs gives high school students first-hand exposure to college, while allowing them to gain both high school and college credit.

According to National Center for Education Statistics (2005), secondary/postsecondary learning options data, this trend is growing. During the 2002–2003 school year, there were approximately 1.2 million high school students enrolled in dual credit courses. Of these, 74 percent or 855,000 enrollees were in courses taught on a high school campus, 23 percent (i.e., 262,000 enrollees) were in courses taught on the campus of a postsecondary institution, and four percent (44,900 enrollments) were in dual credit courses taught through distance education. While dual enrollment nor early college experiences, as a type of reform, are not new concepts, the experiences gained by and the cultural realities of students (and faculty) can be significant factors that affect the success of the comprehensive high school.

According to Boyer (1983), neither size nor breadth of comprehension captures the purpose of the high schools. “High schools, to be effective, must have a sense of purpose with teachers, students, administrators, and parents sharing a vision of what they are trying to accomplish... ‘they are’ more significant than adding up the Carnegie units that the student has completed” (66). Academically, the [comprehensive] high schools measure progress by to what extent its students think critically and communicate effectively, learn about themselves

and others, serve individual students’ aptitudes and interests, and promote social and civic obligations (Boyer 1983).

## Purpose

The purpose of this study was to record participants’ experiences in an early college innovation, and by systematically capturing an account of policies, structures, politics, and participant experiences, to inform the design and implementation of similar reforms. In addition, the study’s aim was to ensure that students enrolled in this early college “experiment” at Florida Atlantic University’s (FAU’s) University High School would have a research-base on which to make modifications in subsequent years of implementation. It should be noted that this University High early college experience is not the same as dual enrollment. The difference is that in dual enrollment, the high school student belongs to a high school and takes college classes either on the high school campus or on a college/university campus. In this case study setting, there is no high school (i.e., there is no building, there is not a ball field, there is not cafeteria, etc.)

## Method

Two university researchers collected data as participant observers, leading to a description of an innovative University High

---

“To many observers, these students are pioneers (although some would call them “guinea pigs”). The official Web site refers to this group of 11 students, who left behind public and private high schools throughout the southeast portion of the state of Florida, as ‘The Vanguard.’”

---

School early college experience designed for students in grades 10 through 12. Using a case study, as a mini-ethnography, the researchers looked at the implementation of one of the many unique experiments that can be tested as part of the current education reform movement that includes dual enrollment, home schooling, university high schools, virtual high schools, and early college. The conceptual framework for this single school case study was influenced by the literature on high school reform, K-20 seamless structures, and similar experiments. The researchers used field notes and semi-structured interviews to collect nine months-worth of participant observations, describing relevant activities and perspectives of participating students, their parents, the university high school leadership team and its staff. The researchers followed up their findings using Maeroff, Callan and Usdan’s (2001) and Burke’s (1997) constructs of governance, equity, efficiency, standards, quality, community building, choice (access), and accountability, respectively.) In analyzing the data, new more dynamic and integrative categories emerged, i.e., “Choice”; “Possibilities”; “Disparate Discourses”; “Learning and Efficiency, Standards, Quality, and Accountability”; and “Borderlessness.” Maeroff, Callan and Usdan’s (2001) original eight constructs appear within one or more of these emergent themes.

#### Model

#### Choice

In May, 2003, the case study University High School received University Board of Trustee approval to expand from grade nine

to through grade 12. This University High School, however, was to be a virtual high school, i.e., not to be constructed with bricks and mortar, or with high school teachers, high school administrators or a high school curriculum. The only material realities that make this university high school were its legal designation and authority to award high school credits and a diploma, and its student body.

Out of 165 applications, 14 students were selected the first year of implementation (which is the focus of this article). Of the 14 students selected, 11 10–12th graders chose to come to University High for year one of the program’s implementation. According to student interviews, they came for “the academic challenge to be in college” and “the opportunity to [complete] two plus years of college while still getting [their] high school diplomas,” and, because “the state was providing them with free university tuition, fees and texts.”

To many observers, these students are pioneers (although some would call them “guinea pigs”). The official Web site refers to this group of 11 students, who left behind public and private high schools throughout the southeast portion of the state of Florida, as “The Vanguard” ([www.coe.fau.edu/fau.high/fau-info.pdf](http://www.coe.fau.edu/fau.high/fau-info.pdf)). In return for giving up traditional high school courses and extracurricular activities, the students, with a signed parental release letter, were “free” within limits to explore any and all aspects of university life. In a number of courses, the university administration held seats in course

---

“In return for giving up traditional high school courses and extracurricular activities, the students, with a signed parental release letter, were “free” within limits to explore any and all aspects of university life. In a number of courses, the university administration held seats in course sections so that these students could attend their college classes as a cohort. The idea of a cohort was to create learning communities among the students for purposes of social and academic support.”

---

---

“Prior to its establishment, the state had twice rejected formal proposals by university to create and build a traditional high school as part of the existing university school campus.”

---

sections so that these students could attend their college classes as a cohort. The idea of a cohort was to create learning communities among the students for purposes of social and academic support.

The curriculum of these “pioneers” was specific to the 19 required courses for university admission and a state of Florida scholarship known as “Bright Futures” modeled after the Georgia’s well-known “Hope Scholarships.” Students completed 24 credits, a quality senior project, administration of the college placement test or ACT/SAT beginning in the 10th grade, and 100 community service/learning hours. In addition, once a week, i.e., on Friday afternoons, these 11 University High students would meet for a freshman seminar, or PSY2930, titled “Strategies for College Success.” This course provided a common time for bonding, information and/or resource gathering, and academics. The class was designed as an orientation to college life and held in a temporary classroom. During the seminar/course, the students met with the University High program coordinator, a guidance counselor, a math and a science teacher, the director of the university school, and oftentimes, the University School’s K-8 principal. Because the University School is designated as a State University Lab school, it functions as its own school district. Therefore, many of the student’s class discussions during the Friday afternoon seminars evolved into actual policies governing this innovation, as well as the K-8 school.

At year’s end, with two graduating students (one accepted into the University’s own Honor College with a full scholarship and the other to one of the state’s top-tier public universities), many questions still lingered, such as whether the students could have returned to their home high schools with higher GPAs; whether they earned college credits through AP exams or the traditional dual enrollment program; or if University High

students earned grades of C’s or less, would they be penalized and would they be scholarship eligible?

#### **Possibilities**

Two organizational structures came together to make University High a reality—a large state university and a K-8 university laboratory school affiliated with the university’s College of Education. Prior to its establishment, the state had twice rejected formal proposals by university to create and build a traditional high school as part of the existing university school campus. In 2002, the university’s College of Education dean hired a new University School director and K-8 University School principal. The director had legislative experience and had served in the same capacity at one of the state’s only other three university lab schools. Under his leadership, and with the support of the dean, the university president, and the university’s Board of Trustees, the concept of University High evolved as an early college dual enrollment program with ninth graders (potentially university high feeder students) taking a rigorously designed curriculum at the university school, while 10th through 12th graders would take all of their classes on the university campus.

The leadership team, i.e., the dean of the College of Education, the University High School director, the school’s program coordinator and University High School principal, patterned their model on an already existing in-state dual enrollment program, i.e., Okaloosa-Walton Collegiate High School ([www.owcollegiate-hicah.org/aeninfo/index.htm](http://www.owcollegiate-hicah.org/aeninfo/index.htm)). The Collegiate High School (CHS) at Okaloosa-Walton College is an innovative charter school. It is unique in that it enables 10th, 11th and 12th grade students to simultaneously earn both a standard high school diploma and a

---

“The concept of University High evolved as an early college dual enrollment program with ninth graders (potentially university high feeder students) taking a rigorously designed curriculum at the university school, while 10th through 12th graders would take all of their classes on the university campus.”

---



---

“What makes this kind of program unique is that as a laboratory school, it has the legal status of a school district. Thus, it is able to make policies—with students’ and parents’ input—in terms of dual enrollment, articulation and weighting of grades to meet its particular needs. The leadership team also has direct access through email and one-on-one or in structured and unstructured settings to a high level steering committee made up of the associate deans from the Colleges of Science, Liberal Arts and Engineering. Also serving on the committee are the directors of equal employment opportunities and the director of university admissions. In other words, the leadership team and, therefore, the students themselves are positioned to receive personalized attention with respect to all university services.”

---

transferable two-year college degree or transferable college credits. The CHS is a public school and is free of charge to students. College-credit classes, college and high school textbooks, transportation, use of a personal laptop computer, tutoring and more are all provided at no cost.

What makes this kind of program unique is that as a laboratory school, it has the legal status of a school district. Thus, it is able to make policies—with students’ and parents’ input—in terms of dual enrollment, articulation and weighting of grades to meet its particular needs. The leadership team also has direct access through email and one-on-one or in structured and unstructured settings to a high level steering committee made up of the associate deans from the Colleges of Science, Liberal Arts and Engineering. Also serving on the committee are the directors of equal employment opportunities and the director of university admissions. In other words, the leadership team and, therefore, the students themselves are positioned to receive personalized attention with respect to all university services. According to the Okaloosa-Walton College director of admissions, “we can tailor [a program] to the strengths of the student.”

At Florida Atlantic University High School, within the team and its support staff, were issues pertaining to responsibilities, communications and coordination. There was no infra-structure or previous relationships to fall back on, which made tasks—everything from communicating with parents to putting together a phone list—a trying experience. Oftentimes, the tasks fell to students themselves. They were asked to research bylaws to establish clubs, research on their own—colleges of interest and even scholarship opportunities. Nevertheless, the leadership team and staff kept all of these logistics and student concerns as the primary topics for continuing discussions. They did so collaboratively with good humor and open enthusiasm.

### **Disparate Discourses**

The language used by the University administration and staff was always optimistic, yet tentative. Most of the work on-the-ground was prefaced with ambiguous phrases such as “It depends”; “We’ll double check”; “I can’t tell you [now]”; “We don’t have a policy”; “If that’s not working, then...” In contrast, students and parents insisted that “there were promises made” that needed to be kept. Students and parents wanted something concrete; they wanted to hear specifics. They wanted actions to meet their concerns. Several times during the first year, the disparate discourses looked as if they would tear the innovative program apart. There were even accusations of being less than honest and downright deception, and threats of returning to old high schools.

Remarkably, there were no permanent ruptures. Both sides learned how to communicate better. First and foremost, the administrators acknowledged to parents and students that they needed to do a better job of communicating in letters to parents. Likewise, parents and students learned to work through discussions on policies and procedures. Moreover, the leadership team

moved decisively on a number of issues to nail down policies and decisions, ranging from course registration, the date and place for graduation, field trips, and other daily policies all changed from words to action.

Interestingly, one discourse never wavered. That was best captured in the program coordinator's use of language, i.e., the very first day of the school term, the coordinator asserted: "Nothing is impossible." Throughout the year, her message to the students was consistent: "We do better together." Her discourse functioned as the glue that held the community together.

At the same time, there were indications of interpersonal conflict among the leadership team and its staff—all just below the surface. Outwardly, the rhetoric was "if we all work together, we can work this out." Below the surface, it was left up to individuals to learn their new roles. Clearly, the staff was stretched.

### **Learning and Growth Efficiency: Standards, Quality and Accountability**

As with many innovative projects, pre-planning also has its limits. Oftentimes, participants in this initiative indicated that they felt as though they found themselves waiting around and hearing false promises. As the year progressed, however, wait time was

---

"Despite setbacks, one student earned a 4.0. Another, however, stopped going to class and was placed on probation. Some took too many credits. Some withdrew from courses, and therefore did not earn full credit toward high school graduation. Most of the first-year 10th through 12th graders, however, did well. The University High students also took advantage of varied "collegiate" opportunities while taking their courses with high grades. A new curricular track was also developed."

---

reduced. Transitions became smoother. The students had access to all members of the leadership team, the staff, and whenever necessary, members of the steering committee. Systems communications, too, improved across the large state university campus.

### **Discussion**

Despite setbacks, one student earned a 4.0. Another, however, stopped going to class and was placed on probation. Some took too many credits. Some withdrew from courses, and therefore did not earn full credit toward high school graduation. Most of the first-year 10th through 12th graders, however, did well. The University High students also took advantage of varied "collegiate" opportunities while taking their courses with high grades. A new curricular track was also developed.

While observations and interviews revealed that University-High students received special privileges (e.g., "tons of time" from associate deans) that enhanced their status and facilitated the daily work that needed to be done, there were snafus (e.g., held seats were lost, test deadlines missed, and shortcomings in services received). At such times, the intervention of the leadership team or the steering committee led to the successful resolution of these problems.

A small group of individuals (i.e., the steering committee which also included the school director and the program coordinator) made progressive inroads into a rigid and sometimes dysfunctional university bureaucracy (e.g., utilizing multiple computer systems that oftentimes were not compatible). These inroads were particularly significant in that the university often did not function well as a service provider. Examples could be found in communications, policies and computer systems that operated as discrete services across offices, such as admission, registration, textbooks, record keeping, comptroller, etc. In other words, the university, as an organizational entity, was not a seamless system. But, through persistence, and with powerful forces such as the university president's support of this innovation, positive program changes were made throughout the year. The University High School experience became an organizing principle, itself; where associate deans were forced to communicate better with department chairs who in turn communicated better with faculty.

It would be misleading to focus on the system as opposed to the individuals, however, for it was only through the persistence and commitment of individuals, i.e., the students, staff, and parents who ended up making systems come together to work better on behalf of the students for whom this new model emerged.

### **Conclusions**

This mini-ethnography is representative of year one only of this "early college" school reform. The discourse from the mini-ethnography and interviews conducted indicated a dynamic and integrated picture of what life was really like for

---

“The steep learning curve and growth of students, parents, administrators, and staff was not only observed by the researchers, but openly acknowledged by the innovation’s participants.

So, while living through the year was filled with many anxious moments, the climate and willingness to repeatedly revisit concerns emerged as a positive social and institutional dynamic.”

---

these university-school participants during the initiative’s first year of implementation. The steep learning curve and growth of students, parents, administrators, and staff was not only observed by the researchers, but openly acknowledged by the innovation’s participants. So, while living through the year was filled with many anxious moments, the climate and willingness to repeatedly revisit concerns emerged as a positive social and institutional dynamic.

The researchers will go on to conduct this research longitudinally, and to develop a more refined conceptual

framework, over the next several years. Such an intent is particularly appropriate since a minimum of at least a three years time span is considered most appropriate before implementation analysis is fully conducted. Further, only then might one be able to create a baseline upon which the effectiveness of subsequent initiatives might be measured. What we, as researchers, think that we can accurately state is that what is happening today is that school policy is being extracted from the actions taking place in similar experiments locally, statewide and on national levels.

### Implications for Further Research

It is too early to say whether Florida Atlantic University High School can serve as a model for statewide or even national replication; and the design is too limited. But, the lessons learned are significant and at times, questions are seemingly unending. For example, a substantial economic savings to parents results from this type of early college program, but what if one of these highly-ambitious, bright students wishes to attend an Ivy League school or some other select university? How will a college or university respond to students who might earn 60 or 70 or 95 college credits already completed at another university? How will other universities, outside of the study state, weigh grades of C or D? Will these early college university-high students choose to stay at the partner university? How will these findings hold up to larger quantitative studies. As a beginning to answering some of these questions, the researchers of this study plan to examine new students as they enter the program, as well as to follow current and graduating students as they go on to college, adding a longitudinal dimension to the research.

## REFERENCES

American Youth Policy Forum. June 2004. Understanding the impact and outcomes of secondary-postsecondary learning options. Roundtable discussion. Washington, DC: American Youth Policy Forum.

Boyer, Ernest. High school: A report on secondary education in America. New York: Harper & Row, 1983.

Burke, James. 1997. Performance funding for state colleges and universities: Review and recommendations. Paper presented at an Education Commission of the States workshop. Providence, RI. In Heller, D., ed. 2001. The states and public higher education policy: Affordability, access, and accountability. Baltimore, MA: John Hopkins.

Collegiate High School, chartered by Okaloosa county. Okaloosa Walton Collegiate High School. <http://www.owcol->

[legiatehigh.orci/gen\\_info/index.html](http://legiatehigh.orci/gen_info/index.html), accessed March 27, 2005.

FAU Board of Trustee approval in May, 2003. FAU-High School its legal, designation [s.1007.271FS].

Finn, Chester 2006, Obstacles on the route from high school to college. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, p.B40.

Florida Atlantic University College of Education - FAU-High School, <http://coe.fau.edu/fau-high/fau-info.pdf> accessed March 27, 2005.

Haycock, Katie 2006. Student readiness: The challenges for colleges. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, p. B38. Jacobson 2006. A Nevada county shows that schools and colleges can work together. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, p. B24.

Katz, Stanley 2006. The liberal arts and college. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, p. B46.

Kirst, Michael & Andrea Venezia 2006; What states must do. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, p. B36.

Kirst, Michael & Andrea Venezia, 2004a. *From high school to college*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

Kirst, Michael. April 2004b. Thoughts on improving K-16 governance and policymaking. Paper presentation.

Kirst, Michael & Andrea Venezia 2001a. Bridging the great divide between secondary schools and postsecondary education. *Phi Delta Kappan* magazine.

Kirst, Michael & Andrea Venezia 2001b. Overcoming the high school senior slump. San Jose, CA: National Center

for Higher Education and Public Policy.

Bailey, Tom, K. Hughes, and M. Karp. March 2003. *Dual enrollment programs: Erasing transitions from high school to college*. CCRC Brief. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University.

Maeroff, Gene., Callan, P.M., & Usdan, M.D. (2001). *The learning connection: New partnerships between schools and colleges*. New York, NY: Teachers College.

NCES National Center for Education Statistics. 2005. <http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/frss/publications/2005009/26.asp>, accessed May 7, 2005.

Van Maanen. John. 1998. *Tales of the field: On writing ethnography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.