

A Modest Invitation

How colleges can help advance secondary school reform

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Last fall, the states of Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont formed an unprecedented collaboration committed to rethinking the traditional American high school on a regional scale to more effectively mirror the lives and learning needs of today's students. Our partnership, the New England Secondary School Consortium (newenglandssc.org), is dedicated to fostering forward-thinking innovations in the design and delivery of secondary learning across the Northeast. With funding from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, in partnership with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, we have spent the past year laying the groundwork for an ambitious schoolhouse-to-statehouse effort to create equitable, 21st-century systems of public secondary education in each of our member states. As we move into the next phase of our work, collaborating with New England's higher education community will be one of our top priorities.

Working with collegiate leaders is critical because we know that postsecondary expectations are a major driver of educational decisions and actions at the secondary level. Many students select their high school course of study based on their perception of what colleges want to see on a transcript. High schools, in turn, design certain courses and programs to prepare students for college-level curricula. And the SAT and ACT remain major sources of pre-collegiate adolescent and parental anxiety, even as experts in and out of higher education debate the merits of these tests in the application process.

In some cases, the expectations communicated by the higher education community—particularly explicit admissions policies and implicit preferences—have a beneficial effect on secondary education. They encourage high schools to maintain high academic standards, help to elevate adolescent ambitions and preparation for collegiate learning and provide specific academic and experiential goals for students. In other cases, these same expectations, which are often ingested along with a heady cocktail of persistent myths, have unintended consequences. Too many courses are designed not to truly prepare students for success after high school, but to meet perceived postsecondary expectations; high-achieving students avoid exploring personal

interests or taking academic risks that might adversely affect their grade point average or class rank; anxious parents exert excessive pressures on their children to excel; and—perniciously and tragically—talented and intelligent students, nearly always from disadvantaged backgrounds, choose not to attend college because somewhere along the way they have internalized the belief that they are not “college material.”

For decades, our high schools have been engaged in an earnest campaign to improve, innovate and evolve. Many of these efforts have petered out or failed, some have succeeded admirably, and a few have surpassed expectations and redefined the concept of what our high schools can and should be. The core values that motivate these efforts will be immediately recognizable to any college educator: an enduring belief that a high-quality education, if properly administered, will have a salubrious effect on our citizenry, our social inequalities and our democratic institutions, while also warding off the more unsavory symptoms of multigenerational illiteracy—including systemic poverty, perennially low aspirations, civic disengagement, and increased rates of crime and disease. Although this underlying truism is typically obscured as we go about our professional responsibilities, postsecondary and high school educators are nevertheless engaged in the same fundamental project. We are all playing for the same team, and it's critical that we remind ourselves from time to time of this overlap in purpose.

Acknowledging connection

So how might higher education assume a more active role in advancing secondary reform? The first step forward is to acknowledge that our two systems are deeply and inextricably connected. The decisions made by our nation's higher education leaders will directly, if not always obviously, impact our secondary schools and students. Secondary education's influence on higher education is similarly profound, given that colleges endeavor to educate the students our high schools produce, and success in this venture is contingent, in many ways, on the effectiveness of the systems that precede it. The next step is to start making decisions—and changing policies—that take this symbiotic relationship into consideration.

Consider an example: What if New England's colleges and universities announced their endorsement of standards-based grading and reporting practices in high schools? (Even though states have adopted secondary learning standards into law, high schools continue

to use traditional grading and reporting practices—letter grades, number averaging, credits—that do not require students to demonstrate mastery of standards. Consequently, most high school diplomas remain unreliable indicators of student achievement. Some students graduate from high school knowing calculus, for example, while others acquire only rudimentary math skills.) What if they also announced that class rank would no longer be a factor in admissions decisions? And what if a variety of unconventional though proven pathways to the demonstration of student achievement—performance-based assessments, senior theses and exhibitions, rigorous career and technical programs, early college experiences, internships—were given equal weight alongside standardized test scores, grade point averages and honors courses on college applications? What impact would these new policies have on our high schools? What innovations would they drive?

We need to take successful local collaborations—ranging from enhanced support for first-generation college students to flourishing dual-enrollment models to innovative school-university partnerships to linked professional development opportunities to improved transparency and sharing across our data systems—and reproduce them at scale.

The ripple effects of such an announcement could bring about a paradigm shift in our high schools. Overnight, these pedagogical strategies would be endowed with far more intellectual and cultural credibility. Many centuries-old traditions in our high schools would come under a new level of scrutiny. And the resistance faced in advancing secondary reforms—the uphill political battles, the doubts of an uninformed public, the outspoken anxieties of concerned parents—would be considerably mitigated, as attention shifts from an unreasoning attachment to the past toward a new and more innovative vision for secondary learning.

This is not to argue that the example above is the right next step for higher education to take, but it does illustrate that postsecondary policies and public positions have a potent influence on secondary education, and that collegiate institutions can leverage their cultural authority and prestige to advance the cause of secondary reform.

So where do we start? We can begin by addressing the traditional disconnect in learning expectations, curriculum alignment, pedagogical philosophy and data exchange among our high schools and institutions of

higher education. College educators don't want to be besieged by unprepared students every year, and high schools don't want to produce graduates who are so unequipped for collegiate study that they drop out or never bother to apply to college in the first place. But it happens every year and in nearly every high school and college. And it will continue to happen at alarmingly high rates until higher education and secondary education come to common agreement on what, specifically, constitutes college readiness and which pedagogies are most likely to produce the outcomes desired by both parties. Working to address this disconnect may not immediately produce a silver bullet, but it will result in an improvement over the status quo, in which only 70% of ninth-grade students graduate from high school nationally, only 34% of young adults ages 18-to-24 are enrolled in college, and only one in five New England undergrads succeeds in earning a postsecondary degree or credential.

This deep-rooted disconnect is no longer acceptable in 21st-century America. A college degree has become too important; the challenges we are facing—as a region and a country—are too great.

Scaling up

The good news is that examples of effective collaboration between collegiate and secondary educators abound at the local and state levels. But the large-scale improvements in educational outcomes that both systems desire remain elusive. We need to take successful local collaborations—ranging from enhanced support for first-generation college students to flourishing dual-enrollment models to innovative school-university partnerships to linked professional development opportunities to improved transparency and sharing across our data systems—and reproduce them at scale. We need to think more ambitiously, strategically and systemically, which means we need to work together regionally. We need to impact more students more substantially. And we need to act now before another generation of wide-eyed youth pass through the doors of our high schools.

The New England Secondary School Consortium is now midway through its initial phase, and we are looking to enlist the region's higher education community in creating a plan to address the issues raised here. We are ready to move, and we want your ideas. Let's get started.

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