

October 2006

Commentary: Alignment Is a Two-Way Street

In response to the recent Higher Education Commission report, Secretary Spellings unveiled her plan for improving American students' access to and success in higher education. Although the press reports have largely focused on questions about financial aid and transparency, the secretary also emphasized the importance of aligning high school expectations with the demands of college. She urged postsecondary leaders to work closely with states on alignment.

Although some in higher education might view alignment as the K-12 system's job, the K-12 system can't set standards in a vacuum. With nearly three out of 10 entering freshmen needing to take at least one remedial class, and even more dismal graduation rates for those needing remediation, higher education has a critical role to play in ensuring that students arrive at their institutions ready to succeed.

For high school teachers to successfully prepare students for college, they need a clear target to aim for. Unfortunately, such a target does not exist in most states. Higher education institutions do not normally define and publicize the knowledge and skills students need to succeed in credit-bearing courses. Nor do institutions -- even within states or systems -- necessarily agree on what those skills are. Some colleges and universities give placement tests and can sometimes tell you what "cut scores" students need to be placed into credit-bearing (non-remedial) courses. Institutions also may be able to tell you what courses students must take in high school to be prepared. But it has generally been rare for institutions to clearly articulate the prerequisite knowledge and skills young people need to succeed in freshman courses. Cut scores and course titles are poor substitutes for standards.

The good news is that postsecondary leaders in a growing number of states have begun to

News Clips

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1. **Proving that all students can succeed.** Too often, good-news stories about improving student achievement hide an ugly truth -- that even as the performance of affluent, white students is improving, their poor, minority peers are not able to keep pace. But in [Massachusetts](#), a national leader in education reform, recent results among 10th graders in three of the state's poorest communities showed dramatic improvement -- a sign that efforts to hold all students to high standards, combined with intensive support for struggling students, can pay off.
2. **Opting to end opt out.** Already a leader in implementing rigorous graduation requirements, [Arkansas](#) officials are considering going even further. State leaders are considering eliminating the opt-out provision that allows students with parental permission to earn a high school diploma without taking advanced math and science courses. Ten percent of parents opted their children out of the curriculum this year, the first year of the new requirement. Officials argue that eliminating the opt-out provision would send a clear signal to students and parents about what is needed to succeed in the workplace and would ensure that all students are prepared for

work with K-12 leaders to get clearer about what it means to be college ready. Seventeen states in the American Diploma Project (ADP) Network have worked with Achieve to align high school standards with higher education, and more states will start that work this academic year. In every case, higher education officials are playing an important role. In **Georgia**, for example, every public two- and four-year institution has faculty committees that have actively participated in the recent revision of the state high school standards. In **Louisiana**, an alignment team representing two- and four-year postsecondary institutions worked with K-12 leaders to align the high school standards with levels of performance required for success in first-year college courses. In **Indiana**, postsecondary leaders not only helped shape the high school standards, but they also require students to take the Core 40 curriculum (which is based on those standards) for admission to four-year colleges.

The work in these states has the potential to not only raise standards in high school but also fundamentally change who owns them. Imagine if the standards for graduating from high school were co-owned by K-12 and higher education. What a powerful message that would send to students and their parents: If you meet these standards, K-12 says you are ready to earn a diploma, and higher education says you are prepared for freshman courses.

Achieve is pleased to be joining forces with three of the nation's most prominent higher education organizations -- the American Council on Education, the State Higher Education Executive Officers and the National Association of System Heads -- to mobilize college presidents and state postsecondary officials across the country to actively participate in this agenda. In January, we will be co-hosting a national summit of college presidents and higher education executives from the 26 ADP Network states, and we will be following that up with a series of regional roundtables to more broadly engage postsecondary leaders.

Postsecondary leaders do indeed have a role to play in improving student preparation for college. We applaud the secretary for her leadership on this issue, and we look forward to working with higher education leaders

college and work. An [editorial](#) in a state paper supports the move.

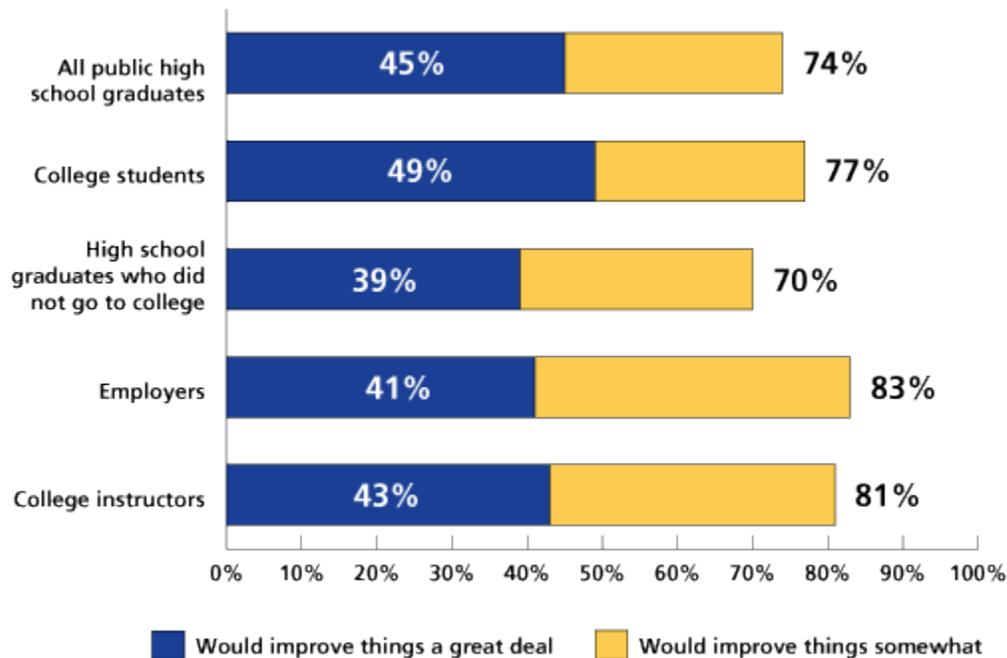
- 3. Optimism about college readiness efforts.** Three years into the Early Assessment Program, [California](#) State University (CSU) officials report that test scores have not improved, but they remain optimistic that the program ultimately will decrease remediation rates among CSU students. One key to improving results, according to officials, is expanding participation to more school districts. Through the program, high school juniors answer 15 additional questions on the English and math parts of the California Standards Test, plus they write an essay. Students who score proficient are exempt from CSU math and English placement exams. Students who do not score proficient are provided an early warning that they have gaps in their learning they need to fill to be prepared for college-level coursework.

across the country to close the expectations gap.

Did You Know?

The Vast Majority of the Public Agrees that Math and Science Are Important

Percentage who say requiring biology, chemistry, physics and four years of math to graduate would encourage high school students to work harder/be prepared



Source: Peter D. Hart Research Associates/Public Opinion Strategies, *Rising to the Challenge: Are High School Graduates Prepared for College and Work?* prepared for Achieve, Inc., 2005.

Business leaders and policymakers are not the only ones concerned about the level of preparation students are receiving in math and science in high school. Recent high school graduates -- both those who went on to college and those who went straight into the workforce -- believe that requiring biology, chemistry, physics and four years of math would encourage high school students to work harder and be better prepared.

New Resources

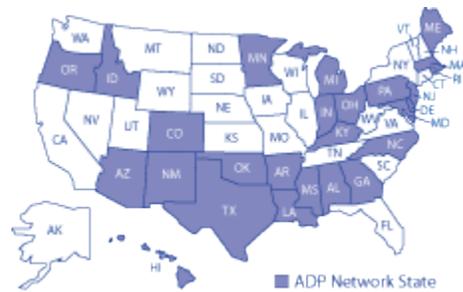
- Many states are focusing on building high-quality data systems to harvest better information about student, school and district performance. Although *collecting* better data is essential, knowing how to *analyze and apply this information* is just as important for improving student achievement. In its new brief, [Data Use Drives District and School Improvement](#), the **Data Quality Campaign** looks at ways leaders at all school system levels can use longitudinal data to meet students' individual needs and improve performance.
- A new [survey](#) by **The Conference Board, Corporate Voices for Working Families, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills** and the **Society for Human Resource Management** finds that employers continue to be frustrated by the lack of preparation high school graduates receive, citing deficits in skills ranging from

critical thinking and communication to basic math and reinforcing the results of Achieve's 2005 [survey](#). The Conference Board's findings further highlight the importance of obtaining at least some postsecondary education and training -- respondents reported that students from two-year colleges were better prepared than those with only a high school diploma and that graduates of four-year colleges were generally the best prepared of all.

- Despite continuing reports of poor school and student achievement, most superintendents and principals have a far different outlook on their local schools. According to a new [survey](#) by **Public Agenda**, more than half of the nation's superintendents consider local schools to be "excellent," and they are substantially less likely than classroom teachers to believe that too many students pass through the system without learning. Not surprisingly, leaders in districts with large minority and low-income populations have a less rosy outlook on the performance of their schools and students.
- The benefits of obtaining postsecondary education and training are well documented -- more than two-thirds of new jobs between 2000 and 2010 will require at least some education beyond high school -- but a new [report](#) from the **National Conference of Citizenship** on the health of U.S. citizenship shows that the impact goes far beyond the workplace. According to the report -- which looks at 40 indicators of civic health, including level of education -- college graduates are much more likely than their less-educated peers to be engaged citizens. For example, they are more likely to vote, volunteer in their communities, read newspapers and participate in civic groups.

New from Achieve

ADP Network continues to grow. Last month, **New Mexico** joined the American Diploma Project (ADP) Network, becoming the 26th state to commit to bringing together K-12, business and postsecondary education leaders to align expectations and better prepare students for college and work.



Perspective is sent to you monthly by Achieve, a bipartisan, non-profit organization founded by the nation's governors and CEOs to help states raise standards, improve assessments and strengthen accountability to prepare all young people for postsecondary education, work and citizenship. Please feel free to circulate this e-newsletter to your colleagues.

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