

Published Online: January 3, 2011

COMMENTARY

High School to College: The New Alignment

By Jordan E. Horowitz

For a number of years now, we have been hearing how high schools are not doing the job they need to do and that students remain woefully unprepared for college and careers. In fact, high schools have been doing exactly what we ask of them, but it is time to reassess what we ask of our secondary educational institutions and how we judge the job they do.

To be fair, high schools have been doing just what we have charged them to do for years. They are graduating students who have mastered state content standards in a number of subjects or disciplines, as measured by state standardized tests. We know this is our expectation because this is how we determine success. Passing end-of-course exams, high school exit examinations, or comprehensive single-subject tests is the way we assess students' knowledge. These tests are linked to state standards in identified subjects, and all are created by educators, content experts, and others in various combinations. Recently, we've seen movement from purely academic standards to college- and career-readiness standards, with postsecondary faculty and business leaders joining the panels. Often, these are accompanied by a complete revamping of the assessments linked to the standards. However, this will do little to improve college readiness. This is alignment redux—we continue to align high school curricula and work to state standards and assessments.

If we really are going to improve secondary education outcomes, we need a new alignment. My work with the California Partnership for Achieving Student Success [www.cal-pass.org] (Cal-PASS) has made me a believer in this new strategy. We must link high school exit expectations with college-entrance expectations. That said, this new configuration requires some courageous conversations.

First, postsecondary institutions must be able to clearly state and explain what is expected of entering students. It is not enough, for example, to require a certain number of years of math, English, and other subjects; nor is it enough to require a passing grade in Algebra II. We must identify the specific knowledge students need to succeed in college-level math.

Second, we must develop longitudinal student-data systems that allow us to track students from year to year, school to school, and educational segment to segment. Without this evidence, we are doomed to creating educational policy and basing educational reform on anecdotes. We must move from, "*I had a student who ...*" to a review of data based on thousands of students who can

be disaggregated by factors demonstrated to influence academic achievement. And we must ensure that stakeholders engaged in this work have access to the data in a useful and useable format driven by their needs and not by standard, packaged, “what’s available” reports.

Finally, this must be done by faculty members. In the recent past, high school faculty have been relegated to the role of curriculum technician in too many instances. However, these faculty members work every day with our students. It is time we started trusting our educational professionals and encouraging the development of the local professional education community. We must get these groups talking to each other on a local level. Every community college knows its primary feeder high schools. Faculty members must meet and engage in a process of discovery that encourages them to: look at the evidence, such as course repetition and remediation rates; compare curricula, scope and sequence, and assessments (college faculty may not know what scope and sequence is); and identify solutions to implement. School districts have been willing to invest millions of dollars and myriad resources in innovations from external groups. Why not invest—what we’ve found to be a far smaller amount—in locally derived and created solutions?

A Successful Example: Cal-PASS is a voluntary data-sharing collaboration. Funded by the state of California through the California Community Colleges System Office and major foundations, this service is free to schools and colleges. All 112 community colleges and nearly all public universities share their data with more than two-thirds of K–12 districts. Student-transcript and standardized-test data are uploaded each fall for the prior academic year. The database currently holds more than 415 million records representing approximately 25 million students, with the ability to track back as far as 15 years. Without divulging student identities, Cal-PASS enables practitioners to track cohorts’ progress from kindergarten through middle school and on to college.

Cal-PASS has developed tools and methods that safeguard the privacy of student records, while still making it much easier for educators to track years of results. The database is fully compliant with the federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, or FERPA. All student data are encrypted and password-protected, and only authorized users have access to the data warehouse. Participants in the consortia must keep data confidential.

With Cal-PASS, the emphasis is on improving instruction and results, not on pointing fingers or bringing down accountability hammers.

By making comparative data more readily available, Cal-PASS helps educators spot curricular misalignments and design interventions to improve student success rates. It engages teachers and college faculty from the same disciplines to meet monthly in professional learning councils, where they work closely and collectively to diagnose strengths and weaknesses and align school and college curricula.

Twelve-hundred educators, grouped by discipline (English/language arts, English-learner, math, science, social science, allied health, etc.) within a geographic region participate in more than 60 councils across California. Aided by Cal-PASS regional coordinators and research staff, this

grassroots network adds force to members' recommendations for better methods of teaching. These teacher-to-teacher insights come from the front lines, not the top down.

For example, one English council was disturbed by transition data indicating extremely high rates of their high school students were being placed into remedial postsecondary English courses that were below college level. Upon comparing curricula, faculty across the different levels of education noted that high school English is literature-based, while postsecondary English focuses on rhetoric and demands greater expository reading and writing skills. Faculty members worked across the secondary and postsecondary segments of education to infuse more nonfiction reading and writing into the high school curriculum. Standardized-test scores improved, school adequate yearly progress improved, and upon placement in college-level English when they matriculated to the local postsecondary institutions, these students passed with a C or better at a higher rate than their non-program peers.

If we are to prepare our youths for workforce demands at every level, it is imperative that we work across education divides. We must share data across the educational segments, and we don't need to identify students in these databases to do so effectively. Postsecondary institutions must accept their responsibility for defining what it means to be college-ready in a way that is actionable. Above all, we must trust our faculty to do this work. If we do not engage in these three efforts, we will continue to fail our students in multiple ways.

Jordan E. Horowitz is the vice president for foundation relations and project development at the Institute for Evidence Based Change and the senior director for special projects with the California Partnership for Achieving Student Success, or Cal-PASS, in Long Beach, Calif.

Vol. 30, Issue 15