

What's Missing: Why Foundations and Policy Analysts are Impatient with the Pace of School-College Reform

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Abstract

This article addresses the checkered history of school-college reform initiatives with regard to increasing college access among low-income youth. It considers what is missing in the reform movement and why policymakers and funders have grown impatient. Focusing on what is possible, this article suggests what is needed, recommending three strategies for promoting college access and advancing school-college reform.

Closing the gap between high school and college has been a staple in the current school reform agenda. The rationale is that the divide serves as a barrier to college access, encourages students to dropout, and marks a profound discontinuity in educational practices between grades twelve and thirteen. For the past twenty-five years, calls for the creation of a P-16 education system, making schooling seamless from the first day of pre-school to the last day of college, have abounded, coming from the statehouse and the White House, and from the nation's pressrooms and corporate and foundation boardrooms.

Yet after a quarter century of school reform, we are no closer to creating such an integrated system. America has separate K-12 and higher education systems. The reform movement has built bridges across the divide but has not bridged the divide. The school reform movement has produced a cornucopia of initiatives designed to build linkages between the two systems. They have ranged from professional development programs for teachers and after school and summer school programs for students to realignments of curricula to enhance educational quality and joint courses designed to open educational opportunity. They have included dual enrollment, school/college partnerships, and structural innovations such as the early college that spans secondary and higher education, generally in the form of a high school that includes the first two years of college. These are just a few examples of the kaleidoscopic array of initiatives, which have been attempted in the past two and a half decades to bring our colleges and schools closer together.

However, they have left policymakers and funders impatient for speedier action and greater progress. This article discusses the reasons for that impatience. It looks at the assumptions that funders and policymakers have made regarding prospects for bridging

the gap. It suggests that expectations have not been realistic and proposes an alternative. Rather than seeking a unified school-college system, it recommends focusing on a small number of joint strategic initiatives that are essential to promote college access for populations that have been historically underrepresented in the university. The article relies upon conversations with philanthropists and policymakers carried out in the course of a study of U.S. schools of education (Levine 2006), a study of first-generation college students conducted at Harvard (Levine and Nidiffer 1996), a study of Dominican teenagers living in the Bronx (Levine and Scheiber n.d.), and a study of college migration and attendance patterns in Illinois (Dean, Hunt, and Smith 2006).

Impatient Donors and Policymakers

Their criticisms can be divided into five different categories, all of which are justified and all of which are not. They vary from reasonable expectations to magical thinking (Didion 2006). Some incorporate both.

1. There is a feeling of being subjected to the “Charlie Brown Treatment.”

In the comic strip “Peanuts,” Charlie Brown, the downtrodden hero, has a friend named Lucy, who holds a football, which he is supposed to run up to and kick. Every time they play, Lucy pulls the football away at the last moment and Charlie Brown falls down. She always promises not to do it and then does it anyway. The “Charlie Brown Syndrome” is believing “it” is not going to happen this time in spite of a mountain of evidence to the contrary.

School-college cooperation has taken on a bit of this character. It is a reform effort that occurs every thirty years with the predictability of a metronome and has never been successful. In every era, it is led by people holding roughly the same positions in government, business, philanthropy and education. It employs the same reform strategies, variants of those mentioned above. School-college cooperation movements occur when both the public schools and higher education are being publicly criticized at the same time; in essence, they are forced into each others’ arms in a relationship fueled by funders. Cooperation lasts only until the criticism abates and the money runs out. This is what brought the school-college reform movements to their conclusion during the progressive era, the Depression, and the 1960s.

Funders and policymakers are saying that they had the football pulled away yet again. This encourages reluctance on the part of some funders we spoke with to support university-based projects. Instead they choose other for-profit and not-for-profits to lead their projects.

2. Colleges and universities have attenuated their ties with school practice and policy.

Colleges and schools in America were created separately and have historically been independent and disconnected from one another, which will be discussed

more fully later in this article. Nowhere are the consequences of the separation more apparent than in education schools, which would logically serve as a primary connection between the university and the schools. Instead, schools of education have attenuated their ties with K-12 education in order to win the approval of the university, which views education schools as vocational rather than academic, preparing women for a low status job. Since their origin in the late nineteenth century, education schools have been engaged in a continuing struggle to gain acceptance from the university by modeling themselves after colleges of arts and sciences, the cornerstone of the academy. To accomplish this, they moved away from the schools and the people who worked in them. They refused to become professional schools where students are educated for careers in the schools and faculty are engaged in research and service designed to improve the work of schools (Levine 2006).

Funders and policymakers have been critical of the disconnect. It is perceived as the university ducking on school improvement, the most important education issue facing the country. The consequences were apparent in a recent meeting of state lawmakers attended by one of the authors. A participant asked the group of about twenty of his colleagues, How many of you feel you are getting your money's worth out of education schools? Not one person raised his or her hand.

3. Universities are slow to move and mobilizing faculty is difficult.

Collegial governance is a time-consuming process and as a result planning, design and implementation of reform initiatives seems to move at a glacial pace to many funders and policymakers. Mobilizing faculty, which has been compared to herding cats, is not easily accomplished because every faculty member comes with his or her own research agenda and a great deal of autonomy. This makes it nearly impossible for universities to move large numbers of faculty from their area of specialization to a common area of concern, no matter how urgently regarded by policymakers and funders. The combination of slow action and inability to move faculty as a group has been interpreted as arrogance and indifference, academic fiddling while Rome burns. We have heard college and university donors who gave money for school/college initiatives and several deans who were expected to implement them complain how very difficult it was to get projects up and running. One of the challenges they cited included recruiting a critical mass of faculty for adequate amounts of time who agree to work together to tackle a common agenda.

4. The persistence rate of college/school initiatives is low.

The end of grants, changes in key personnel and institutional leadership, shifting priorities and lack of ownership mean that joint school/college projects are unlikely to be institutionalized, which is true of most reform efforts. This has been interpreted by some funders and policymakers as a lack of commitment and disingenuousness in seeking or accepting funding and voiced in the phrase "they never intended to institutionalize the program." The "they" is an unidentified party

or parties—perhaps the provost, the president, the faculty, the principal, the superintendent, the school board, the school and/or the college. It is the “they” of them, not us. Of course, it is also important to recognize that funders and policymakers may actually encourage such behavior with practices such as providing only short-term funding, largely start-up money for new initiatives, investing in the “fad du jour” or flitting from funding priority to funding priority and infrequently granting support for institutionalization of activities.

5. There is a lack of hard data on the impact of school/college partnerships.

The quality of research on initiatives attempted in the name of school improvement is poor. There has been a greater tendency to report outcomes via anecdotes and satisfaction surveys than with hard data. By these standards, most reform efforts are successful. In all fairness, few foundations adequately fund evaluation, nor do they fund projects long enough in most cases to have meaningful results. They may talk about the importance of assessment and wring their hands regarding the state of assessment, but very few funders actually support quality assessment. However, such data driven research is essential if we are to understand the outcomes of our experimentation. The paucity of such data has led a number of foundation education officers and policymakers to criticize universities for the quality of their research and for being unwilling to be held accountable.

Magical Thinking

Magical thinking is wanting something impossible to happen so badly that you actually believe it can or will occur. The notion of an integrated P-16 system fits into this category. To say integration did not occur as a result of the five above criticisms is silly. None of the criticisms should have been a surprise. Each and every one of them could have and should have been anticipated before the first grant was made. They are intrinsic to the physiognomy of schools and colleges, which are dramatically different organizations historically and structurally.

Historically, colleges and common (elementary/middle) schools were founded in this country in the seventeenth century. The high school, which is the closest link between higher education and the schools, did not come into existence until the nineteenth century. Initially, neither the common schools nor the universities wanted to be associated with it. In fact, colleges, many of which had sub-collegiate units, competed head-on with the new secondary schools for students graduating from eighth grade. In the end, high schools made a home in the public school system and today have more characteristics in common with elementary and middle schools than with universities (Levine 2006).

Over time, the separate and bumpy development of the higher education and K-12 systems has produced a widely different set of values and practices in each sector. They have different governance systems, which include separate governing boards and internal operating systems driven alternately by faculty at the university and administrators in the schools.

The preparation of faculty in each sector varies. To become a professor, one needs to have a doctorate. School teachers need only a baccalaureate degree to be hired. The reward system favors research in the academy and teaching in the schools.

Teachers live in an environment dictated by union contracts, state standards and testing regimens while most professors have a great deal of autonomy and power over how they use their time, what and when they teach, and the forms of assessment they employ. The conceptions of time in schools and colleges are dramatically different. Schools and universities do the bulk of their business at different hours. In contrast to professors, teachers are paid by the number of hours they spend in the schools.

Curriculums at schools and colleges are designed independently. At colleges, this generally occurs without reference to the school curriculum and produces annoyance when the schools do not follow the collegiate lead.

There is also a profound difference in status between schools and colleges. Colleges have historically looked down at the schools and the educational credentials of their teachers. For the most part, universities have viewed school-college cooperation as higher education sharing its expertise with the schools. This, generally, has not been well received by the schools, which see this behavior as arrogant and condescending.

Given the enormity of the differences between schools and colleges, an integration of the two systems is highly unlikely. Indeed, if third and fourth grade were constructed in the same fashion as college and high school—having different governance systems, independent curriculum designs, separate funding, a history of competition, substantially different teacher preparation, differing measures of success, and divergent reward systems—today we would be lamenting the chasm between third and fourth grade. We might be speaking wishfully of a unified P-4 system.

The point is this. Though it would be desirable if education were all one system, the politics of making this occur are horrendous to contemplate. It might make more sense to build a small number of strategic ties between schools and colleges in those areas essential to promote access to higher education by groups that have been historically underrepresented. Such a system might look like this.

What Is Possible: How the Poor Are Still Getting Into College

What is possible in bridging the gap between our nation's colleges and schools and in achieving college opportunity for America's disadvantaged youth? In a study of anomalies, among poor young people who made it to college in contrast to most of their peers, Levine and Nidiffer (1996) found a series of commonalities that promoted higher education attendance. They termed the combination "one arm around one child." It included the following five points:

1. an early start,

2. a local approach,
3. individual plans,
4. enriched experiences and minimized risks, and
5. mentors or mentor teams.

In wealthy suburban communities, Levine and Nidiffer noted, there is the equivalent of a superhighway between high school and college. In poor communities, that road does not exist. The youngsters they studied were more like pioneers, having to blaze their own paths to get to college. College attendance, they found, increases when students are identified early as college bound and preparation for college begins in elementary school. This includes the academic, social, and personal development necessary for college success.

To be successful, they needed to avoid the potential dangers around them—crime, drugs, pregnancy, and early death. They also needed the tools to advance their trek, such as tutoring, counseling, extracurricular activities, and enriched courses. Providing enriched experiences not only yielded tools to advance, but also kept kids focused, occupied and out of trouble.

All of this was made possible not through systemic interventions. Rather, it came through the influence of mentors and mentor teams. Each of the children studied by Levine and Nidiffer had a mentor, an individual who taught them about the American dream, convinced them of the importance of college, identified the resources the child needed to get to college, and delivered them to the campus gates. Individual mentors were essential, but even more powerful were teams of mentors, consisting of relatives, teachers, friends, and others who were significant in the student's life.

The process by which low-income people attend college is an individual rather than a mass phenomenon. It requires a retail rather than wholesale work; intensive interaction with individuals rather than passing contact with large numbers. Efforts to promote college access, therefore, need to be built specifically around the needs of a particular target population as barriers to college differ by community, ethnicity, religion, economic status and race, among other factors.

Each child was an anomaly, yet their collective stories yield powerful lessons that might be used to design or improve strategic programs.

A decade later, a study of college choice and student migration patterns (Dean, Hunt, and Smith 2006) verified that the poor still get into college through many of the interventions Levine and Nidiffer identified, but that three more elements should be added to their list (Dean n.d.). These include:

6. early and ongoing college advising,
7. college affordability, and
8. college campus supports.

Young people and their families have differential access to information about how to prepare and choose a college, how to gain admission and pay for college, and how to perform successfully while there (Dean n.d.; Kane 1999). Even where information is equally available, individual students may have circumstances that prevent them from equally accessing and advantaging that information (Dean n.d.). For example, differences in cultural capital (Bourdieu 1973) can affect variances in whether and where a student goes to college (Anderson 1996; Dean n.d.; Hamrick and Stage 2004; McDonough 1997; Oakes and Lipton 1999; Rendon and Hope 1996). Additionally, those who recently immigrated to this country or who speak English as their second language face communication barriers that may prevent them from understanding how to navigate U.S. postsecondary education (Ceja 2006; Dean n.d.). Those low-income students who have early and ongoing college advising that includes guidance on how to make college affordable have a greater chance of making it into college.

College advising differs from the individual mentoring described above, although it may include that type of relationship. Advising should entail formal preventative and intervention services that help students maximize their achievement, develop personally and socially, and plan their education and careers (ASCA n.d.). Counselors' specific college-access responsibilities include broadening students' horizons by informing them about college as a life option after high school, assisting students to choose and obtain the personal and academic development necessary for college preparedness, providing college-related information and helping students and their families understand college choice, admissions and financial aid processes (ASCA n.d.).

While mentoring can help develop college aspirations in disadvantaged youth and shepherd them through to college, mentoring is only available for the fortunate few who develop such relationships. College advising can and should be available to all students, an institutionalized program that should pervade P-12 systems. For disadvantaged youth who are not predispositioned to go to college, it must begin in elementary school, making students familiar with college, assisting them in preparing, making the admissions and financial processes manageable, and addressing the personal and social issues that college attendance entails for first-generation students.

Dean and her colleagues noted disparities in college choice options according to how much financial aid counseling students received as part of their college advisement (Dean, Hunt, and Smith 2006). College is expensive. Admission is only half of enrollment. To be able to attend, low income students need financial aid. They need to understand the financial benefits of college, college pricing, actual college costs and financial aid options. First-generation college students have a particularly difficult time understanding bewildering financial aid processes. Students from middle- and lower-income strata need greater information about grants and scholarships, for they share concerns over accumulating loan debt that either they or their parents will have to repay. The psychological stress of future loan repayments can adversely affect college enrollment and persistence, especially among lower income students (St. John, Hu, and Weber 2000).

While the aforementioned eight interventions bring students to the college gates, additional interventions are needed after their arrival. During the admissions process, students need a welcoming climate and positive student-university relationships (Dean, Hunt, and Smith 2006). After enrollment, a supportive campus environment is critical for the retention and success of minority and low-income youth (Chang 2001; Coelen, Berger, and Crosson 2001; Hurtado et al. 1999). They need to be connected to campus life as early as possible. They need appropriate academic and developmental supports. Those who enter community colleges with the intent of transferring to four-year institutions particularly need further support in the forms of seamless articulation agreements with potential transfer institutions and adequate academic advising to facilitate that process. Unfortunately, U.S. college graduation rates (sixty-six percent) rank only fourteenth among developed countries (OECD 2004), indicating that American colleges and universities may do a better job of getting students in than they do in supporting them through graduation.

Access to college would increase if colleges and schools together addressed any of these challenges and made these interventions commonalities-not anomalies-for disadvantaged youth. This might be achieved by focusing on a small number of strategies which colleges and schools could adopt and sustain without incurring the panoply of criticisms discussed earlier. The more challenges they address, the more access could be expected to rise.

If the goal is to increase college access, then schools and colleges need to sort through the current arsenal of cooperative ventures and focus on those activities most likely to increase college attendance among underrepresented groups. Drawing from research and examples, we offer three strategies that would help gain greater traction in increasing college access.

Strategy 1: Help Low-Income Children Perceive College as a Real Option

Diego, a South Bronx fifteen-year-old from the Dominican Republic, said he knew that if he went to college he could leave the Bronx, marry a high school graduate he respected, get a good job, find a nice home and help his family. Diego went on to say that he had not been to school in several weeks and while he attended that day, he did not go to class. Instead he had sex under the staircase (Levine and Scheiber n.d.).

Arthur Levine grew up in Diego's neighborhood. He brought several of the people he grew up with to meet with Diego and his friends. They talked about what life was like now versus then. The greatest disparity in attitudes between the old and new residents was over school. The oldsters described school as though it had been their jobs as kids; you were supposed to be there every day. You had to do all of your homework every night. Their futures depended upon it.

Current residents were surprised. School was boring. They did homework irregularly if at all. Spending seven hours a day in school was enough. Requiring homework on top of that was unreasonable. In fact, going to school every day was unnecessary.

The conversation turned to report cards. What was a good grade? For Levine's friends, grades under eighty-five percent were problematic. For Diego's friends, a passing grade of sixty-five percent was good. Arthur told the story of bringing home a grade of ninety-nine percent in physics and having his father ask, "What happened to the other point?" His group laughed and nodded, but the boys thought the story a lie and his father psychotic. Levine's friends were unanimous. Their parents knew when report cards were coming and had very high expectations. If these were not met, there were lectures, expressions of disappointment, anger and punishments inversely related to the grades. Neighborhood parents compared report cards with other parents and did not want to be embarrassed.

The boys said they did not show their report cards to their parents. They signed the report cards themselves. When there were letters from the school about poor performance, they destroyed them. When there were phone calls, they did not report them. Their parents did not know what happened to their children in school or in the world outside of school. The boys attributed this to parents not speaking English, working long hours, having only one adult at home, not knowing the neighbors and a cultural divide between the Dominican Republic and the United States.

The boys' attitude toward school reminded Levine and his friends of their own behavior regarding Hebrew school. They acted out, they cut school, they did not do homework, they hid report cards, they did not bring notes home and when possible they tore up letters. They dropped out as soon as possible after compulsory schooling ended with their bar Mitzvahs. This was only in part because they thought Hebrew school was boring. More importantly, they had perceived it as irrelevant. They saw no connection between Hebrew school and their futures. They knew no one whose career prospects or life was better because he had gone to Hebrew school.

In a very real sense, this is what Diego and his friends were saying. They did not know many people whose lives were better because of school. Theoretically, they knew education was important, but their world offered only a paucity of real life examples of beneficiaries. In their lives, school was irrelevant. Moreover, they could not imagine what a better life looked like in reality.

Schools and colleges acting in concert can make a profound difference in the lives of kids like Diego and his friends. The task is to make college real. Whereas children from higher socio-economic classes are socialized early on to accept college as a predetermined-or at least possible-destination, low-income youth need an earlier start. Pre-college intervention and advising in the last two years of high school comes too late. By then, it is difficult to turn around the lack of predisposition and preparation. Disadvantaged youth need an early and ongoing college advisement. They need

contact with examples of college graduates with whom they can identify. They need to see the life college graduates live, the places they work, and the worlds they inhabit.

Making this happen necessitates expanding the role of the school guidance counselor to include responsibility for assuring college counseling at all grade levels. Beyond that, a variety of strategies might be used, such as implementing K-12 curricula to include teaching about colleges in the same way that schools incorporate into their curricula the worlds of hospitals, fire stations, police stations and other societal institutions. In elementary school, low-income children should have sustained Big Brother and Big Sister programs with college students and chances to visit the homes of college graduates to see how they live. Middle school students should be provided with opportunities for internships in organizations populated by college-educated workers.

Colleges and universities could introduce programs such as the National College Advising Corps Initiative (Jack Kent Cooke Foundation 2006), which trains recent college graduates to serve as college counselors for low-income high school and community college students; the College Guide Program (University of Virginia n.d.), which does the same; or the Advancement Via Individual Determination program, which prepares underachieving minority students to have the study skills and resiliency skills necessary for college success (Olson 2006). These advising programs offer models of working, well-funded school-college partnerships that offer real promise for results. The goal is to turn the idea of college into a personal imperative.

Strategy 2: Help Parents and Caregivers Understand College and Expect a College Education for Their Children

Parental involvement in a child's education is an important predictor of college enrollment (Cabrera and La Nasa 2000; Hamrick and Stage 2004; McNeal 1999; Perna 2000). However, most low-income parents have had relatively little education, no contact with higher education, and few if any friends or relatives who have education beyond high school. This disadvantages their children, who cannot turn to these parents or caregivers for guidance and information about college preparation, admission or attendance. Their lack of knowledge can be seen in the three examples that follow.

First, Arthur Levine was interviewing mothers in a housing project in Lawrence, Massachusetts (Levine and Nidiffer 1996). They were largely Hispanic, single, young and never completed high school. He asked what they hoped for their children. Their answer was what most parents would say. They wanted their children to be happy, to do well and not to get in trouble. Levine asked about college and their eyes went blank. He realized he had asked the equivalent of, "Do you expect your children to fly to the moon?" College was not part of their world.

Second, Levine went to an open school night with a student and his parent in the South Bronx (Levine and Scheiber n.d.). Let's call him Carlos and call his son Esteban. Levine asked Carlos, a Dominican who had four years of formal education and worked in a factory, what he wanted for Esteban, his pride and joy who was then in middle school. Carlos wanted his son to grow up to be a gentleman. When they met with Esteban's teacher, Carlos asked whether his son was a gentleman. The teacher said he never gave him any trouble. Carlos got up to leave with a big smile on his face. Levine asked the teacher another question: How well was Esteban doing in school? The teacher perused his grade sheet and reported Esteban was failing four out of five classes. Carlos asked once again whether Esteban was a gentleman and the teacher replied that he never gave him any trouble. Carlos left with a smile on his face.

Third, Dean and Hunt interviewed students, their parents and the guidance counselor at a low-income magnet high school in Chicago (Dean n.d.; Dean, Hunt, and Smith 2006). They were told the story of DeShaun, a bright young man enrolled at another low-income magnet school who had simply walked into his high school's office one day, got his transcripts, and withdrew. Although performing well academically, he decided to voluntarily drop out. He told his friends that school was not for him. His mother, a single parent who had also dropped out of high school, did not try to dissuade him.

In each case, the parents lacked knowledge concerning what their children needed to succeed in twenty-first century America. Although they wanted good lives for their children, they were unaware of the power of educational attainment and the potential goal of a college degree.

We need to make college real for low-income parents as well as for their children. They need to understand why higher education is important for their children's futures, how their children should prepare for college, what their college options are, and how they can pay for college. The power of parents who see college as a real option for their children is evidenced in the following two examples.

Tenisha was a graduating senior in a low-income magnet high school whose family income qualified her for the reduced-price lunch program. Her guidance counselor smiled as he remembered his introduction to Tenisha's mom. Nearly four years ago in September, his cell phone rang while he was at a professional conference. The woman on the other end said, "This is Mrs. McLauren, Tenisha's mom, and I really need to talk to you about something." He could not recall having any seniors by that name, not even any juniors (Tenisha was a freshman). Her mother urgently wanted to know, "Should Tenisha do volleyball or music? Which will help her more with going to college?" Since then, Mrs. McLauren has been there every step of the way, periodically attending guidance meetings with her daughter, and asking questions. Tenisha has recently been admitted to Georgetown University. The guidance counselor still scratches his head over how Mrs. McLauren got his cellular phone number (Dean n.d.).

Maria's mother, Juanita, showed the influence that parents can have beginning with the earliest years of their children's education. Juanita is a single mother from Mexico with four years of formal education who does not speak English and has no green card. She lives in El Paso. Juanita wanted Maria to have a better life than hers. She is a great cook and invited Maria's kindergarten teachers to lunch. She explained to them what she wanted for her daughter while five-year-old Maria translated. The teachers passed Maria up from grade to grade to grade. They watched over Maria to make sure she did not get into trouble and to provide her with enrichment experiences. To protect Maria from the world outside of school, Juanita dropped her daughter off at school every morning, picked her up after classes and took her to work. Juanita and the team she constructed were successful in getting Maria to college. She went to Harvard for her undergraduate degree and Yale for her M.D.

These parents were anomalies, but they need not be. Colleges and schools and communities can work together to help give parents the skills and knowledge to lead their children to college. The strategies and settings for this public information campaign would need to be specifically tailored to communities, fitting families' cultures and daily realities. The goal would be to create a critical mass of such parents in a community as there were in Levine's old working-class neighborhood (Levine and Scheiber n.d.). Such programs would have the potential to turn the route to college in low-income communities from individually hewn paths into a well-paved road.

Strategy 3: Help Kids Become College Ready

Increasing college predisposition and parental support alone cannot help low-income youth gain access to college. They also need to be "college ready." College readiness has traditionally been defined as having taken a set of core preparatory courses in areas such as English, mathematics, science and history that are needed for admission to college. However, in practice, being "college ready" necessitates far more than content knowledge. Critical thinking, analytical reasoning, problem-solving, and a habit of inquiry include just some of the skills required for college success.

Research and practice have evidenced that simply taking the right classes does not equate to college readiness. For example, in the past decade the twenty-three-campus California State University system annually admitted over 40,000 students who had graduated in the top third of their classes and had taken all the appropriate college preparatory courses, yet nearly half of these students arrived on campus not ready for college work (Smith 2006). The students thought they were ready, the schools thought they were ready, but the colleges had different expectations for what kind of content knowledge, thinking and learning skills were required. In another example, one of the nation's two giants in college entrance exams researched the relationships between students' high school courses, ACT exam scores, and college grades. They concluded that successful completion of college preparatory courses cannot predict that students will pass the ACT exam at college-ready score levels (Olson 2006); neither can Advanced Placement courses. The College Board (2007), the other of the two college

entrance exam giants and the one which administers Advanced Placement exams, reports that while sixty-three percent of Asian American and sixty-two percent of White students who sit for AP exams receive passing scores (earning college credit for their high school AP courses), only forty-four percent of Hispanic, forty-three percent of Native American, and twenty-seven percent of African American students who sit for the same exams receive passing scores. Even successfully completing Advanced Placement courses does not necessarily indicate college readiness.

Ensuring college readiness should be a critical function of all high schools, but at least three barriers stand in the way: the lack of a common definition of college readiness, a sharp and indiscriminate divide between school and college curricula, and the need to uncouple assessing college readiness as part of the entrance exam process.

The need for a clear and common definition of college readiness is paramount. While all fifty states have adopted standards in core subject areas and are developing assessments that align with those standards, only a fraction require a college preparatory curriculum (nine) or have definitions of college readiness (eleven) (EPERC 2007). Even fewer (five) have aligned their graduation requirements with state college entrance requirements (Olson 2007). Promisingly, however, an initiative led by the nonprofit group Achieve, Inc., the American Diploma Project, is helping twenty-two states define college readiness standards, align them to K-12 curricula and graduation requirements, assess student performance, and hold schools accountable for results (Olson 2006; Spence 2007). As evidenced in the studies conducted by ACT Inc. and the College Board, this definition needs to be performance-based and not rely upon accumulating high school credits in courses bearing certain titles. High school curricula vary widely and often differ significantly from college courses with comparable titles.

The sharp and indiscriminate divide between school and college curricula deserves criticism for a host of different reasons. There are both repetition and gaps in the course of studies that span across high school and entry-level college courses; advanced high school students in rural, under-funded or small districts lack opportunity to study subjects absent in their schools, and mismatches pervade the skill and knowledge expectations between the two sectors.

Standards for Success, led by faculty from the Association of American Universities and sponsored by the Pew Charitable Trusts, articulated the knowledge and skills students need to succeed in college-level work and specific academic areas in top-tier universities across the nation. These standards became the basis for SpringBoard, a middle- and high-school level program from the College Board mathematics that helps kids prepare for Advanced Placement courses and college (Olson 2006). While the SpringBoard program is laudable, in reality the entire middle- and high-school experience should be a spring board for students. Yet nearly half of both college instructors and employers in a recent study agreed that public high school graduates were neither prepared for college nor for advancement beyond entry level jobs (Peter

D. Hart Research Associates/Public Opinion Strategies 2005). It should not require a supplemental program to meet those goals.

Schools and colleges need to act together to overcome the disjunction in curricula to promote college access. Defining college readiness and making that definition performance-based, coupled with clear articulation of desired content knowledge, must be the starting point. From there, high schools and colleges can better articulate their course offerings.

Finally, schools and colleges may help increase college readiness among students if they begin assessments earlier than during the college entrance exam process. Finding out in the fall of one's senior year that three years of college preparatory work did not result in targeted scores on ACT, SAT or AP exams is too late. Students should not have to pay for remedial courses in college when it is the high school's job to provide such basic education. Once the K-12 schools and colleges can agree on definitions and common learning goals, schools can begin assessing those skills and knowledge at earlier points in high school. One laudable model of early college assessment is California's Early Assessment Program (EAP), a collaborative effort among the California state board of higher education, department of education, and state university system. The EAP assesses college readiness in the junior year of high school, focusing on math and English skills. Schools administer the test late enough to be a meaningful assessment-timed to occur after students have completed a college preparatory curriculum-yet early enough to allow students time to improve during their senior year if they fail the exam. For those students who pass the exam, the California State University system waives its enrollment placement exams (Smith 2006).

While a truly integrated P-16 education system is a practical impossibility, we clearly need greater communication, collaboration and commonality between schools and colleges.

Conclusion: Ending the “Charlie Brown Syndrome”

Initiatives to bring schools and colleges together have been carried out for a number of different reasons. The result has been a rag bag of reforms, more broad than deep, more transitory than persistent, and more experimental than scaled up. The majority of these lack hard data that assesses their effectiveness. Policymakers and philanthropists have contributed to this situation by principally funding start-ups and infrequently supporting the institutionalization of school-college programs.

While many have looked to the creation of a P-16 system as the goal of school-college reform and the answer to educational inequity, there is little likelihood of creating a seamless P-16 school system given K-12 and higher education's disparate structures, values and goals. But there are very real opportunities to gain greater traction in college access. We can stop the “Charlie Brown Syndrome.”

Research shows what works in getting the poor to college. They need an early start, a local approach, individual plans, enrichment experiences that also minimize the risks of their environments, and mentors or mentoring teams. Youth need to have early and on-going college advisement, greater college affordability and supports after they enroll.

The strategies we discussed—helping low-income children perceive college as a real option, helping parents and caregivers understand college and expect a college education for their children, and helping kids become college ready—require a relatively small number of deep-targeted linkages between our schools and our colleges such as mentoring, counseling and curricular articulation. These do not necessitate a fully integrated P-16 school system, but they do require P-16 thinking. They require the belief that disadvantaged youth can go to college and should be prepared as well as advantaged children who grew up in environments that predispose and prepare them for college.

To accomplish this, schools and colleges need to make a commitment, departing from their traditional practice of transitory cooperative programs that last only as long as the criticism and funding continue. They need to build solid bridges that millions of low income young people can use to make the passage between K-12 school and college.

They cannot do this alone. The states should take the lead by clearly defining college readiness, instituting accurate and early assessment, articulating better between high school graduation and college entrance requirements, and more effectively connecting high school curricula and entry-level courses in public colleges and universities.

Funders need to toss away their Charlie Brown expectations and their magical thinking. They need to support deep school-college linkages in the three areas suggested. They need to offer long-term funding, support for assessment and incentives for institutionalization.

We have the capacity to make yesterday's magical thinking become real today. Lucy really can hold the football for Charlie Brown next time. We can build the deep bonds between our schools and colleges that will bridge the gap and substantially improve college access for those people who have been historically disenfranchised.

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