

Innovation in Education: K–12/Higher-Education Partnerships

Partnerships between K–12 districts and higher ed offer a variety of benefits to schools and students.

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As public education grows in academic and financial complexity, central-office functions and the boundaries between the various institutions become increasingly disconnected. From elementary schools to community colleges and graduate schools, educational institutions are distinct in their mission, academic planning, and financial management.

As a result, the challenges in communication, pedagogical flow, and curriculum continuity between grades and degrees are barriers to potentially greater levels of collaboration. This flaw is especially evident during critical student transitions as they progress through the K–12

educational system and move on to college or other postsecondary schooling options.

Very little information follows students who transition between buildings that house different grade clusters—up to and including college and graduate school—aside from transcripts and various test scores. This deficiency is indicative of how infrequently schools of all grades and degree levels make the time to develop the systems necessary to be effective partners.

Traditional public K–12 institutions—from virtual education, charter schools, home schooling, and school choice to voucher initiatives—face increasing economic

pressures that can affect student enrollments and associated school-related fiscal resources. Schools of all levels have enrollment challenges to be certain; however, traditional public schools rarely explore innovative ways to tackle those challenges.

This is the nexus at which public schools are under increased economic pressure to sustain quality opportunities for students; educational innovation just may be the spark needed to create new options. Partnerships between K–12 schools and postsecondary educational institutions offer the potential to increase graduation rates, to foster higher student enrollments for institutions at all levels, and to facilitate the kinds of access and mobility that educational advancement is designed to provide.

To achieve these goals, educators must address academic, administrative, and financial details. School business officials are well positioned to negotiate these details across traditional boundaries.

Taking Down the Wall

Many school districts across the United States have pursued relationships with community colleges in order to offer higher-level courses to advanced students and to enable such students to earn college credit while they complete their high school requirements.

Advanced placement, tech-prep, honors curricula, and international baccalaureate programs have served similar purposes in providing access to more rigorous academic content; however, such arrangements traditionally serve a small percentage of the student population. Additionally, such programs tend to add to a high school core curriculum rather than to supplement or replace it.

To integrate college offerings into the secondary-school environment, educators must overcome three primary barriers (Young and Celli 2013):

K-12 educators lack the preparation to take on more advanced curricula. Education and licensing requirements don't necessarily prepare all educators to be effective teachers who lead students to higher levels of academic achievement on standardized measures. U.S. students who have the highest SAT scores and undergraduate grade point averages are not as pressed to enter the teaching profession as are students in other countries.

Also, the teacher qualification exam and internship requirements for licensure are less exacting than those of other countries (Auguste, Kihn, and Miller 2010). And with a shortage of teachers, districts are left to hire those who are uncertified or ill equipped for the rigors of advanced content and instruction.

Without encouragement, students avoid academic rigor. All too often, students try to avoid challenging courses because of the additional expectations and requirements; however, when students opt to pursue the more rigorous coursework, they are exposed to significantly more content that will help increase their educational opportunities.

Academic rigor translates into better academic and career success (Breakthrough Collaborative 2009). Schools need to make a concerted



effort, then, to encourage students and their families to choose the more selective and challenging academic courses, as doing so will increase the likelihood of future academic and life success.

Administrative leadership fails to promote academic achievement. Although many education leaders acknowledge the fact that the challenges that have plagued public education for decades have yet to be addressed effectively, they are caught amidst contract cycles and contractual language, pressures from political and community stakeholders, and the standard cyclical inertia of the calendar year without the time or inclination to tackle substantive change.

Because of these factors, the desire and ability to be financially innovative as well as to expand and create new partnerships to increase academic rigor become too challenging and remain undone.

A Successful Partnership

School and college partnerships that benefit students, families, schools, and higher-education institutions are not only possible, they are the way of the future. One case in point is in South Hadley, Massachusetts. The South Hadley Scholars Program was developed in collaboration with American International College with

an official rollout in the upcoming 2013–14 academic year. Under this partnership, students from South Hadley High School will be able to take a college-level curriculum that replaces and satisfies core high school requirements while earning credits that will be transferrable to many higher-education degree-granting institutions. In other words, a high school junior or senior can take college-level courses on-site while still having access to other high school classes and all extracurricular programs.

Students who participate in this program while completing their high school graduation requirements may satisfy three objectives:

- Earn all credits necessary to receive a high school diploma on time while having a standard high school experience;
- Complete up to 30 college credits that may be transferrable to the institution of their choice (which translates into advanced academic standing for many colleges and universities); and
- Be automatically accepted into the partner institution, American International College.

The college agreed to discount the cost-per-credit-hour tuition rates.

Courses are taught by high school teachers who are deemed fully qualified to be adjunct professors at American International College. Courses that are offered as part of this uniquely crafted early-college experience range from precalculus to journalism. The syllabus and corresponding expectations for each course offered are fully aligned and mapped against its corresponding on-campus college course to ensure an equivalent set of expectations for all credit-bearing college classes.

Students who participate in the program are considered registered

nonenrolled students at American International College. Conversations are ongoing about giving these early-college high school students enrolled status in their second year in the Scholars Program to facilitate a smooth transition from South Hadley High School to American International College for those who wish to follow this educational path.

One of the most advantageous parts of the South Hadley Scholars Program is that the standard operating budget of South Hadley Public Schools subsidizes it. Through a negotiated agreement between partner institutions, the college agreed to discount the cost-per-credit-hour tuition rates and the school district incurred all personnel costs, including stipends for qualified high school teachers who assume the additional responsibilities for teaching college-level coursework.

In this innovative arrangement, students can complete up to 30 college credits while attending their local high school and meeting their existing requirements for graduation at no additional cost to them or their families.

The partner institution has the potential to enroll new prospective students through this program—perhaps even some students who may have decided not to attend college. This arrangement reduces the college's costs of administration, marketing, and admissions—and especially the cost of student acquisition should a percentage of students choose to finish their bachelor's degree there.

At the same time, South Hadley Public Schools benefits from having a unique program to showcase within a growing competitive marketplace increasingly congested with charter schools and other public schools seeking to increase their own enrollments, while bridging the divide between K–12 and higher education and reducing college completion costs for its own students.

Partnership Across Boundaries

The need to bridge the gap between higher education and K–12 has never been more urgent. Despite this need, few innovative solutions have been put into practice. The South Hadley Scholars Program is an example of a collaboration of public school and higher education that was forged as a partnership to cross the boundary between K–12 and higher education.

Although early-college high schools and associated offerings are not new, this partnership holds the promise of promoting an even-deeper engagement between the South Hadley Scholars Program and a higher academic institution. It is time to remove barriers to collaboration between public schools and postsecondary educational institutions for the benefit of not only institutions at all levels, but, far more important, for the students themselves.

References

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