

The Leadership Challenges of Working Across the Educational Spectrum

By Stephen R. Portch

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Oh, to be a president today. With higher education under the microscope of national commissions and activist boards on the outside, and grumpy faculty and consumer-minded students all making demands from the inside, presidents and chancellors have their hands full. With state budgets declining as a percentage of revenue, federal research dollars flattening as a result of other demands on federal revenue, and capital campaigns increasing into the billions, presidents and chancellors may even be tempted to throw up their hands in despair. On top of all this, higher education policy groups and policy leaders are advocating that academic leaders make the connection between college and high school one of their top priorities. What's a president to do?

Presidents may be reluctant to add yet another priority to their duties, but there are compelling reasons for them to do so. As report after report has documented, national demographics and international competition are creating significant challenges for the nation and its colleges and universities. The successful participation of high school students in higher education has not shown significant improvement despite numerous "reform" activities in K-12 and targeted initiatives in higher education. Overall retention and graduation rates in higher education have proven stubborn to improvement. Just as resistant to improvement, the achievement gap between rich and poor, majority and minority remains a major concern. Within the half-life of another cohort of students, this concern becomes a crisis because of the demographic shifts resulting in ever-increasing minority populations, especially Hispanics. And while we wrestle with these challenges, nations like China and India and constructs like the European Union are forging ahead to increase the educational attainment of their populations.

The alarm bells have been sounded by political, business, and educational leaders. Foundations such as the new-breed Gates Foundation have poured multimillions of dollars into possible solutions, and higher education organizations like the American Council on Education seek to galvanize higher education leaders to take a more visible role in the full continuum of a student's education. The reality is most universities cannot realize their ambitions without better-prepared students, and most states cannot strengthen their economies without more educated populaces.

These calls for coordinated efforts are not new. Over a decade ago, two states (Georgia and Maryland) launched P-16 initiatives aimed at creating shared responsibility for a student's education, from preschool through college graduation. Various known, in an era before branding and marketing, as P-16 or P-20 or K-16 or K-20, the movement spread in one form or another to most states. P-16 is, as Twain famously said of Wagner's music, "better than it sounds." Yet traction remains uneven, with some states experiencing false starts, restarts, or abandonment. Today, there is a new, more focused national movement targeting the high school-to-college transition. With support from 45 governors and national leaders like Bill Gates, the drive to transform the high school diploma into a true indicator of readiness for college and the modern workplace has advantages that the more diffuse P-16 movement lacks, including a focused reform agenda (see "Advancing College Readiness Through the American Diploma Project Network" on page 1) and resources to help move that agenda forward. Sustained leadership from presidents and system leaders on this issue could make all the difference, as a number of relatively isolated examples have demonstrated (see "Involving Higher Education in Raising Expectations and Achievement Levels" and "Early Assessment: An Important Role for the University" on pages 6 and 8, respectively). Boards and state leaders, however, must support such a focus so that presidents can overcome the following impediments.

Competing Priorities. Modern-day presidents need to raise money. Not only do they have to raise private money, but many also have to persuade state legislators to ignore structural deficits in

the state budget in order to spend more on higher education. Furthermore, they have to convince students, their parents, legislators, governing boards, and critics in Congress that tuition increases are justifiable, that costs are under control, and that the return on investment is worthwhile.

Modern-day presidents also need to compete in the arms race for their institutions. The battlefields range from research labs to climbing walls, as we live in an age of rampant educational consumerism. The middle and upper economic classes determine the rules of engagement, and *U.S. News & World Report* declares the victors. From winning sports teams to stealing star faculty, colleges and universities seek attention, branding, and marketing with all the fervor and sophistication of a soft drink giant. While the public policy talk is of collaboration, we measure *competitiveness*.

So it is little wonder that presidents are reluctant to invest much time in working on a statewide project to advance college readiness.

High Risk, Low Short-Term Returns. With political landmines just one Ward Churchill away, the modern-day president has to judge risks and returns more frequently and precisely. Collaboration with K–12 is risky business and getting caught in some crossfire is almost inevitable as politics will almost certainly intrude. Take Georgia in 2001, for example, when a well-established P–16 initiative was tested, as one of the key statutory figures in the effort (the elected Republican state superintendent of schools) declared she intended to run against another key statutory P–16 leader (the incumbent Democratic governor) on a platform of fighting his education reform efforts (including P–16). It is tough to get traction in that sort of mud. Politics can be even muddier when issues of local control get raised in the context of a statewide, systemic initiative.

With legislative term limits and increasingly fractious gubernatorial races, there's increased political pressure for initiatives that will have rapid returns. High school reform is a long-term project with results rarely realized within one governor's term in office.

Finally, modern-day presidents may be daunted by their lack of K–12 experience. Indeed, for many presidents, their only K–12 experience was their own education in a different era. At one time, the road to a presidency more often included a K–12 experience. For the majority of presidents who have spent their whole careers in higher education, the K–12 environment can seem foreign and foreboding.

Yet even with competing priorities, some risks, and delayed results, presidents can leave a true legacy by focusing on improving student achievement through intellectual continuity. This is especially true if they pay attention first to the successes and failures of those who have entered these waters earlier. Seven simple suggestions may be of help as presidents embark on efforts to strengthen the linkage between high school and college.

- 1. Demonstrate enough—but not too much—leadership.** Collaboration succeeds best when all partners perceive that they are equally valued. With the possible exception of a governor or corporate leader, the president brings more prestige, “power,” and resources to the table than anyone from K–12. When a president in one state tried to dictate the agenda of a P–16 effort, control even the minutia, and claim all the credit for the initiative, only he was surprised when the effort floundered until his departure. This is not to say that a president should not commit more than the other partners; the president should, however, be particularly attuned to symbols and sensitivities, and should understand that the high school reform agenda requires much more of secondary education and its leadership than of any other players.
- 2. Dedicate senior leadership.** P–16 pioneer programs in Maryland and Georgia were established because both had a senior person in their university system charged with the day-to-day effort (the “two Jans,” Somerville and Kettlewell). Too many presidents take on K–12 collaborations and then add the assignment to, for example, an associate provost (who is already responsible for too much) or, worse yet, to the education dean. Nothing against education deans, but that's like declaring writing is the sole responsibility of the English department. You need someone who lives and breathes this work and who clearly has the president's ear. The initial investment pays off if the dedicated person also knows how to get external dollars (The University System of

Georgia's P-16 budget is now over \$15 million, much of it from external funding).

- 3. Move quickly from talk to action.** Collaboration with K-12 requires a lot of talking in the early stages. It is not uncommon for the effort to begin with a summit, continue with conferences (often with outside expertise), and then go through a state political process or, sometimes even more complexly, through a shared governance process on campus. All this takes time. In the case of one southwestern state's P-16 efforts, talk was not cheap, but it was perennial, and interest began to wane until a meaningful project was finally launched. Some of the best projects have been around aligning curriculum and standards, often with the help of national initiatives like the America Diploma Project. It's important to take advantage of the structure that such national initiatives provide to both define the agenda and drive it forward.
- 4. Involve faculty early.** Efforts like the American Diploma Project can too often be seen as the toys of the top, when in fact the real success comes from collaborative efforts of faculty across sectors. In addition to understanding curriculum and standards outside their own worlds, faculty engage in marvelous conversations and collaborations outside the formal task (for example, the sharing of pedagogy, technology, and research knowledge and resources). These byproducts can prove to be enduring and have positive, unintended consequences, such as improvements to teacher preparation programs or more imaginative curricula in introductory courses.
- 5. Engage the media.** Efforts like the American Diploma Project can bemuse the public; they often seem like an abstract concept at best and an alien one at worst. If the press focuses on its political basis, with the intrigue or controversy that usually follows, the game is lost. If the press can see the impact on individual students or on faculty working together as respected and respectful colleagues across sectors, then the public can be positively engaged. This needs to be an intentional strategy from the outset.
- 6. Build in sustainability.** Collaborative efforts with K-12 can only be successful for the long term if they outlast both the personalities and structures that created them. P-16 initiatives survive through force of philosophy, outcomes, and habits. Governors and legislators come and go. Presidents, chancellors, and superintendents come and go. If an initiative is built on the "great leader" approach, it cannot be sustained because one or more of these "great leaders" will likely be moving on almost every year. Similarly, if the initiative is built on an overly rigid structure, it cannot be sustained because the structure cannot be easily altered to adapt to changing conditions, like a new governor. Presidents can help new governors reshape K-12 collaborations to fit mutual goals and to sustain the philosophy while morphing the structure.
- 7. Use data.** Sound decision making and long-term credibility depend on using sound data (see "What Universities Can Learn from State Data Systems" on page 10). If a state unit data system is indeed available, it will prove useful to track progress. Even if such a system does not exist, a number of states have demonstrated that data warehouses or data-sharing agreements can be of significant value. These data need to be used for baseline purposes and legitimate research projects. Indeed, colleges of education and other departments should be challenged to use the P-16 activities as a particularly fertile research field.

These seven suggestions can provide guidance for a president. However, at the end of the day, the president's personal commitment, passion, and vision will count the most. If the provost shares those values, then the team will be unstoppable. Leadership matters and improved student achievement is of such importance to our nation and to equity of opportunity that it cannot be left to individual "reforms" in different sectors of education or to random acts of leadership. It has to be a genuine and sustained effort across sectors, so that students come before systems, and presidents have a unique platform from which to lead such an effort.