Building School-University Partnerships

Guest Editors: Margaret W. Sallee and William G. Tierney

Not long ago, K-12 schools and universities were two distinct and non-interacting systems. From the founding of Harvard in 1636, universities built a reputation for themselves as ivory towers, insulating their faculty and students from real-world problems. Early curricula focused on developing the minds of the sons of the elite by providing an education in the humanities and philosophy. Not until the establishment of land grant universities in the mid-nineteenth century did higher education begin to prepare students to address contemporary problems. Still, with a few exceptions, university educators did not seek to engage with those in the surrounding communities.

In contrast, many of today's colleges and universities, particularly those located in urban areas, feel a push to become more actively involved in K-12 education. Institutions have adopted a range of programs to work with those in the schools and communities surrounding their campuses. For example, many land grant institutions operate university extensions as a vehicle to participate with the surrounding community. Once primarily the home of agricultural programs, extension offices now provide continuing education in a range of subjects including business, English language programs, and information technology. Service-learning has also become an increasingly popular way to develop partnerships outside the university. By sending undergraduates to work in schools and other community organizations, institutions of higher education are able to share their resources with the surrounding community. Although there are multitudes of ways in which higher education can partner with K-12 education, the authors in this issue focus primarily on developing partnerships to increase access to college.

Although K-12 and higher education are separate and distinct systems, both ultimately have the same general goal: the education of students. Given this fact, it seems natural that the two systems should collaborate. However, successful, sustained partnerships remain the exception to the norm. For one, school teachers and administrators are often too overwhelmed with the daily demands of working with students to find time to partner with their university counterparts. For their part, as Dean and Levine note in their article, although faculty engage in research, they frequently are out of touch with the needs and realities of K-12 schools. Participants in schools and postsecondary institutions also operate from a different temporal timeframe. Teachers teach when the bell rings for first period; faculty intend to do their research or "outreach" on the day that accommodates their schedule. Needless to say, interactions may not be successful if individuals cannot figure out times when both groups can interact. Such a problem is as much a culture difference between the organizations as it is a temporal conundrum.

Partnerships, however, have the potential to help pool the resources and expertise of educators in both systems to ultimately benefit students. Furthermore, establishing partnerships might allow for earlier interventions to increase access and improve the educational capability of students entering academe. K-12 education does not have the resources to adequately prepare students for higher education. Schools in urban areas are overcrowded, under-funded, and increasingly filled with students from homes in which English is not the primary language. Without help, schools simply do not have the resources to prepare all students for further education. Rather than simply lamenting this fact and doing nothing to solve the problems, those in higher education can step in to offer the necessary support and resources to help address these problems.

School-university partnerships should draw on the strengths of the actors in the two education systems: administrators and teachers' knowledge of schools, and academics' research expertise. By engaging in sustained partnerships with schools, university researchers can get a better sense of the challenges that teachers and students face. Some partnerships send higher education faculty to lend their research expertise to K-12 schools. Other partnerships take the form of collaborative research teams between teachers and faculty, thereby empowering the teachers to utilize research to evaluate their students' progress (Lachat and Smith 2005; Mason 2002). Ultimately, engaging in partnerships has the potential to lead to research that is both relevant and useful.

Although many will point out the benefits of school-university partnerships, even more will point out how remarkably difficult such partnerships are to pull off over a long period of time. One partner or another develops problems or disinterest and the partnership falls apart. Groups come together, but they come together for different reasons and the goals and objectives of the partnership never mesh. Faculty and teachers speak a different language even though they both fall under the rubric of "educator." The inability to comprehend one another's language causes cultural miscommunication that all too frequently results in the rupture of a nascent partnership. The unhappy analysis, then, is that any number of missteps can cause a partnership to fail. In this issue, however, we are less interested in pointing out reasons for failure and more concerned with analyzing how to make such relationships succeed. Thus, think of the issue less as an autopsy about a failed marriage and more as a marriage guide to a successful relationship.

An Overview of This Issue

Each of the authors in this issue addresses the question of how to create meaningful partnerships between schools and universities. The first four articles consider partnerships on a state and national level. While some of the authors offer concrete suggestions for creating national partnerships, others maintain that adopting such large-scale reform is close to impossible. The remaining three articles shift the focus from the state and national arenas to considering specific populations and programs. The intent of the issue is not to provide prescriptive "how to's" as if partnerships are a simple list of do's and don'ts. Rather, we offer here a robust analysis of the challenges to partnerships and have authors suggest ways about how successful relationships

might be forged and maintained. Although some of the authors differ about how partnerships might best be formed, all agree that creating school-university partnerships is necessary for the future of students.

In the opening article, Diane R. Dean and Arthur Levine argue that increasing access to college for low-income students calls for closer collaborative ties between K-12 and higher education. However, they caution that such collaboration does not necessitate the formation of a unified P-16 system. In fact, given the two education systems' disparate histories, attempting unification would be close to impossible. Rather, they suggest that targeted and local collaborations between schools and universities are necessary to help low-income students understand that college is in their future.

Since schools and universities are such disparate systems, collaboration between institutions can often present a challenge. Adrianna Kezar discusses the cultural differences that characterize schools and universities and suggests what practices might best be used to bring the two together. Specifically, she suggests that for school-university partnerships to succeed, a new, shared culture must be created. However, creating a new culture proves to be a challenge for all parties. As such, Kezar provides a list of strategies that partners might employ to create a shared culture and ultimately avoid many of the problems that tend to plague partnerships.

In her article, Sylvia Rousseau thoughtfully argues that collaboration between schools and universities is desperately needed to meet the challenges facing urban, low-income youth. She argues that such collaboration must take a two-pronged approach. First, all students need to be taught by effective teachers. Urban areas typically face a shortage of credentialed teachers who are committed to the communities. Given their role in teacher training, colleges and universities can play a critical role in improving the educational experiences for today's youth. Second, she suggests that schools and universities must collaborate to reverse the low college-going rates of African American and Latino youth. Such collaboration involves creating college-going cultures in local schools and convincing students and their parents of the importance of higher education.

David J. Weerts examines the importance of establishing reciprocal relationships for developing successful partnerships. While many school-university partnerships have relied on a one-way knowledge flow, in which universities acted as disseminators of knowledge, more successful partnerships aim toward reciprocal collaboration. Through such partnerships, K-12 educators can transition from being the consumers of knowledge to partners in its production. Weerts identifies some of the barriers to and factors promoting the creation of reciprocal relationships before applying this framework to a case study of one partnership.

Paz M. Olivérez's article on the challenges facing undocumented students in the transition from high school to college begins the second half of this issue. She discusses the way in which federal and state legislation has shaped access to college for this population of students. Given that they are ineligible for financial aid and come

from homes in which neither parent has experience navigating the U.S. college application process, these students face considerable challenges in becoming college eligible as well as applying to and paying for college. To help ease the transition, Olivérez suggests that K-12 and higher education officials must work together and provides a set of strategies for them to do so.

In their article, William G. Tierney, Ronald E. Hallett, and Kristan M. Venegas consider the importance of timing of college preparation programs. College preparation programs are often seen as a cure-all for the shortcomings of an over-burdened educational system, but the authors suggest that unless they are structured in a particular way, the impact will be negligible on the participants. Tierney, Hallett and Venegas argue that specific components of a program's structure will have an effect on student outcomes. In particular, they suggest that programs must target the areas of attendance, participation, duration, and intensity to ultimately help students successfully enter college.

The articles in this issue advocate for increasing school-university partnerships. However, implementing partnerships without evaluation leaves participants with no knowledge of their effectiveness. In the final article, Brianna Kennedy provides a set of tools for educators to use to evaluate the success of their collaboration. She specifically focuses on evaluating Out-of-School Time (OST) programs, such as after-school college preparation programs. She begins her article by providing a list of features of effective OST programs. She concludes by offering a list of concrete strategies that educators can utilize to evaluate the success of their programs and identify both strengths and areas for improvement.

All of the authors agree that much remains to be done to increase access to college for low-income youth. For the most part, the K-12 and higher education systems have been working separately to try to accomplish this goal. While educators might be able to point to small programs or specific instances of success, wide-scale reform has been elusive. To address this challenge, schools and universities should engage in a variety of partnerships to pool their resources and work to create conditions to help all students prepare for and earn a university degree.

References

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