

The Greater Houston P-16+ Council: Systemic Pathways to Birth-to-Career Access and Success

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Abstract

This article describes efforts of the Greater Houston P-16+ Council (GHPC) to find effective ways to promote student participation and success across the P-16 continuum, from pre-kindergarten through postsecondary education and work-related training.

Shock and “All”

Steven Murdock, now director of the U.S. Census Bureau, was state demographer in the 1990s when he sent Texas educators and legislators reeling with his research findings. After years of examining population and education trends, Murdock predicted that Texas would become a third-world economy by the year 2030 if it did not educate larger numbers of children from *all* racial and ethnic backgrounds to high levels of achievement.

The effect of Murdock’s analysis was so powerful that many civic leaders, from the governor to neighborhood education advocates, cited his work. The governor issued an executive order addressing the issue. The leader of an influential statewide reform group, the Texas Business and Education Coalition, began to index policy changes based on the likelihood that they would produce outcomes that could be termed “good Murdock” versus “bad Murdock.” And the state’s authoritative body for standards and improvement in postsecondary education, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB), developed a comprehensive blueprint for action called *Closing the Gaps*, calling for enrolling 630,000 more students in higher education by 2015.

According to the THECB (2003), Texas sends fewer students on to college than almost all the other states, in part because only 62.5% of its ninth graders graduate from high school. The Texas Commissioner of Higher Education recently noted that only 18% of Texas high school graduates were college ready (Paredes 2008).

When *Closing the Gaps* was launched, the college enrollment rate for white students was 5.1%, with African American and Hispanic students trailing at 4.6% and 3.7%, respectively. As strategies for increasing college participation have been implemented, higher education enrollment has increased annually so that by the fall of 2006 about 217,000 additional students were enrolled. This is about one-third of the 630,000 students called for by 2015 and on target to reach the goal. While progress has been made in participation rates for white and African American students, increases in the overall Hispanic population have slowed the gains in the total percentage of Hispanic students enrolling in college (THECB 2007).

Houston and the Gulf South of Texas prove to be a microcosm of the state's situation. Rapidly increasing numbers of Hispanic immigrants present a challenge because their educational dropout rate is high in comparison to Houston's other racial and ethnic groups. Klineberg's findings (2007) indicate that college degrees are held by about a third of the Asian and white populations, 16% of African Americans and 13% of U.S.-born Hispanics. Hispanic immigrants account for only 6% of college graduates. "Degrees held" are indicators of both access and success, and the data pose a real concern about educational opportunities for all of Houston's residents, especially its Hispanic citizens.

The Case for Increased Rates of Participation and Success in Higher Education

The Murdock and Klineberg data report the facts on participation and success. The imperative for action comes from our understanding of the consequences of inaction. According to a report by the Institute for Higher Education Policy (1998), postsecondary achievement provides both public and private benefits. Increased college participation benefits the public good through increased tax revenues, greater employee productivity, increased consumption, increased workforce flexibility and decreased reliance on government financial support. Society experiences reduced crime rates, increased charitable giving and community service, increased quality of civic life, social cohesion and appreciation of diversity, and improved ability to adapt to and use technology. Individual benefits include higher salaries and savings, greater employment opportunities, improved working conditions, and personal and professional mobility. Individuals with postsecondary education experience improved health and life expectancy, quality of life for their children, better consumer decision-making, increased personal status, and more hobbies and leisure activities.

The Greater Houston P-16+ Council

Getting from *Closing the Gaps* to the current Greater Houston P-16+ Council involved a change in the civic philosophy about the *public* benefits of improved educational opportunity. As one member of the Council stated, "It used to be that getting an education was 'good for you,' but now it's critical to work, health and the overall condition of the community." In response to this philosophical shift, leaders across all sectors in the Greater Houston area came together in 2005 to address the challenge with the University of Houston assuming a key convening and leadership role. Council members met to educate themselves and to discuss how best to participate in the *Closing the Gaps* initiative. Ultimately the group determined that creating a college-bound culture would require focused efforts beginning in preschool, perhaps even from birth. Thus, they expanded their initial membership to include representatives from public and private early childhood education, K-12 educational institutions, community colleges, four-year universities, nonprofit organizations, governmental agencies, businesses, parents, and students.

The Council began by defining itself and its goals. It had to make sense of the concept of “P-16” for an interested, but skeptical public. The GHPC articulated two dimensions of meaning:

- **Segments, Standards, Sequence:** The GHPC affirmed that its work would comprise all forms of education/development that serve Houstonians, *preschool* through *postsecondary*. In each schooling segment across the continuum, the GHPC would pursue the highest standards. But beyond the “fact” of having standards at each level, the GHPC would insist that the standards be *sequenced* such that achievement at one level would align with the demands at the next level. Only then could graduation from high school ensure full preparation for success in college and the workplace.
- **Cross-cutting Issues:** Internal to each segment or level in the preschool to postsecondary continuum, the GHPC framed a set of comprehensive issues that have relevance. They include the quality of curricula and instruction, the role of parents, and the interplay of equity and policy.

The structure of the GHPC is outlined by its bylaws and guiding principles. Council membership consists of 54 individuals from the following sectors:

- 15 from the community, including business people and students
- 14 from elementary and secondary schools
- 9 from four-year colleges and universities
- 7 from two-year colleges
- 6 from preschool and early childhood education
- 2 from philanthropic foundations
- 1 from the THECB

These 50-plus members adopted six goals:

1. Be a recognized, convening collaboration of diverse stakeholders representing P-16+ initiatives.
2. Advance the systemic, comprehensive and seamless alignment of educational and training experiences through an inventory of needs, opportunities and replicable models.
3. Promote a mindset among all children and parents that anticipates postsecondary education and training, including the growth of a college-going culture.
4. Serve as a catalyst for policy development around P-16+ success.
5. Engage and provide leadership to all stakeholders and inform them of issues, challenges and opportunities.
6. Support the overarching campaign of the THECB’s *Closing the Gaps*.

By 2007 the GHPC began to identify its “work,” coming to grips with the realization that a council of about fifty people could not plan and carry out programming for the more than 500,000 students in a metropolitan area of 5.6 million people. Thus, the GHPC had to find a mechanism for responding to “Houston-size” scale.

The Council adopted a role of creating, supporting, and connecting a web of *local councils* that do the “on-the-ground” work envisioned by the GHPC. It helped launch such local organizations in the west and southwest of central Houston and affiliated with a local Chamber of Commerce on the east side of the city whose work contributes to P-16. It is considering affiliation with yet another long-standing community-wide reform organization.

In addition, the GHPC provides comprehensive critique and evaluation services for any organization or project doing P-16 work. For example, the GHPC has staffed a “coordinating board” to provide evaluation and feedback for five Houston-area school districts where data-based strategic planning is aimed at building a college-going culture.

Members of the faculty and staff of the University of Houston are among the most involved organizers of the GHPC. The Council is currently led by the dean of the College of Education, and each of the local councils and affiliates has active participation from the University.

Sustaining and Advancing the Work

The GHPC is constantly spinning webs and networks of action. For local councils and affiliates it provides the Internet site for a one-stop P-16 information database. It mounts mini-summits for its affiliates on critical issues such as high school success and college access, and it works with parents and the business community, engaging them in P-16 efforts. True to its mission to serve as a model for the state, the GHPC also helps propagate P-16 activity outside the Houston area. Its leadership has met with activists who are either beginning or refining P-16 work in Dallas, Austin, San Antonio, Corpus Christi and the Texarkana area.

The ultimate gauge of success for the GHPC is the proportion of children and students in the greater Houston area who are served by a local council or affiliate doing P-16 work. It will be measured by the extent to which the GHPC fulfills its goal to provide opportunities for all Houston’s children to develop to their full potential and to contribute to a vibrant future for the city.

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Author Information

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