

Higher Education and the P-16 Movement: What Is To Be Done?

by Roger P. Davis and Jerry L. Hoffman

In August 2007, the American COMPETES Act was signed into law by the president, an event that went unnoticed by much of the education community. The law's significance, however, should not be underestimated. Among other things, the act authorizes federal grants to states in order for them to better align secondary school graduation requirements with the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in postsecondary education, and to establish or improve statewide P-16 (preschool through baccalaureate degree) education data systems.¹ The challenge to higher education, as expressed by the national P-16 movement, is distinguished by two basic elements: (1) a definition of the crisis facing higher education and (2) a solution to that crisis through the creation of a "seamless" educational network from pre-kindergarten through the 16th "grade."

In this paper, we review the underpinnings of the national P-16 movement and examine how it gained traction. We then turn to our state, Nebraska, as a case study to show how these ideas are carried out at the state level. Finally, as more and more states formally adopt P-16 plans, we offer suggestions about how best to move forward. The most important suggestion we have is that NEA's three mil-

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lion-plus members—spanning both K-12 and higher education—should be intimately involved in the design and implementation of these seamless educational networks.

Over the past 20 years, an array of studies and reports from public and private institutions and governmental agencies have elucidated the growing ills confronting public education in general and higher education in particular. Access, accountability, affordability, coordinated curriculum, the “governance divide” between K-12 and higher education, transferability, concurrent enrollment, data sharing, and uniform assessment have all found a place on the reform agenda.

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Ultimately, what began as crisis for K-12 public education in the 1980s has spread to higher education. Paul Lingenfelter of the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association writes:

The 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*, launched a national debate on the need to increase educational attainment, which, with no signs of ending, has persisted for nearly a quarter century. The initial focus of reform was K-12 education, but the spotlight, inevitably perhaps, is turning toward postsecondary education. Between 2004 and the end of 2006, four national reports, sponsored respectively by the Business-Higher Education Council, the State Higher Education Executive Officers, the Secretary of Education, and the National Conference of State Legislatures, have collectively called for expanding participation and improving degree completion, student learning, and productivity in higher education.

The 2007 Educational Testing Service (ETS) report, *America's Perfect Storm: Three Forces Changing Our Nation's Future*, identifies the crisis as (1) “the wide disparity in literacy and numeracy skills among our school-age and adult population,” (2) the “seismic changes in our economy which have resulted in new sources of wealth, novel patterns of international trade, and a shift in the balance between capital and labor resulting in a profound restructuring of the U.S. workplace,” and (3) “sweeping demographic changes” as our population becomes older and more diverse.³ These three dynamics prompt two essential questions: First, is our educational system succeeding in its mission for both school-age and non-traditional students, of all economic and social categories? Second, is the U.S. competitive in the new global economy? The report concluded that the answer to both questions was no.⁴

The formal connection of the K-12 crisis to higher education emerged during

the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act in 2003.⁵ Later, in 2006, the National Commission on the Future of Higher Education, also known as the Spellings Commission, also pointed to a problem. In their report, *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*, the commission offered some sobering conclusions about the state of U.S. higher education:

As we enter the 21st century, it is no slight to the successes of American colleges and universities ... to note the unfulfilled promise that remains. Our yearlong examination of the challenges facing higher education has brought us to the uneasy conclusion that the sector's past attainments have led our nation to unwarranted

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complacency about its future. It is time to be frank. Among the vast and varied institutions that make up U. S. higher education, we have found much to applaud but also much that requires urgent reform.

It is an enterprise that has yet to address the fundamental issues of how academic programs and institutions must be transformed to serve the changing educational needs of a knowledge economy. It has yet to successfully confront the impact of globalization, rapidly evolving technologies, increasingly diverse and aging population, and an evolving marketplace characterized by new needs and new paradigms.⁶

While the Spellings report was being constructed, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* published a compilation of eight articles and 10 essays acknowledging that the perfect storm referred to in the ETS report was now also sweeping across the college campuses. The title of the lead article, "Powerful Forces Draw Academe Into the Fray," captured the essence of the matter.⁷

As the crisis was being defined, a consensus emerged on the solution to the crisis: a radical reformation of the entire public education system. The New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce suggested that minor adjustments or reforms would not suffice:

The most important truth is that we do not need new programs, and we need less money than one might think. The one thing that is indispensable is a new system. The problem is not with our educators. It is with the system in which they work. That is what the new commission focused on. And it is the implementation of this system that will take courage and leadership.⁸

With regard to higher education, the Spellings Commission advised the academy to accept and engage the critical moment and issued a dire warning if it did not take heed: “History is littered with examples of industries that, at their peril, failed to respond to—or even notice—changes in the world around them; without serious self-examination and reform, institutions of higher education risk falling into the same trap.”⁹

The solution suggested by the Blue Ribbon Commission of the National Conference of State Legislatures was broad systematic reform. They concluded that, “There is a crisis in American higher education. It has crept up on us quickly. It is of significant importance to our future, but the nation is not prepared to address it... It is up to the states—and specifically state legislators—to alter the course of higher education.”¹⁰ The engine for this state-led reform is the national P-16 movement.

The P-16 movement formally began in 1995 in Georgia, and 41 states now have some form of a P-16 initiatives or councils. The titles of these initiatives vary from K-16 to P-16 to P-20, but they all fall within a common definition of state-level efforts to move to an integrated system of education stretching from early childhood through a four-year college degree. The ultimate goal of a P-16 system is to acknowledge the interdependency and common goals of all levels of education and to create a “seamless” system of education.¹¹

A central focus of this movement is the “governance divide” between the P-12 public education systems and higher education. According to Lingerfelter:



The traditional missions of K-12 and postsecondary education have been different in important ways. K-12 has emphasized universality, a common mission, and uniform standards. Higher education has emphasized selectivity, diverse missions, and standards which vary among programs and institutions. When postsecondary enrollment was optional, differences such as these were relatively inconsequential. But growing aspirations for higher education have fueled the P-20 (pre-school through graduate study) movement, which seeks to make the transition from one level of education to the next more transparent and “seamless.”¹²

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Bridging this divide requires a reform agenda that includes: developing a P-20 longitudinal data system, aligning high school and postsecondary assessment and accountability systems, creating a common “core curriculum” for pre-K through college, expanding dual credit/concurrent enrollment programs, and implementing an overarching governance structure and budget process.¹³

A combination of state executive orders, interagency collaboration, legislative mandates, and actions of private organizations are the catalysts moving P-16 agenda forward.¹⁴ One innovative proposal for accomplishing P-16 goals is a concept advanced by the National Governors Association (NGA), described as “a new vehicle for aligning postsecondary education to state economies—the postsecondary education compact.”¹⁵ As outlined by the NGA report, the compact would bind state governments, education administrations, and the private sector together, and involves establishing goals, state responsibilities, and mutual accountability, along the following lines:

- Holding education institutions accountable for meeting established goals in exchange for a state’s commitment to stabilize the postsecondary education budget—rewarding performance and providing autonomy through deregulation
 - Tying budget stability to incentives (or sanctions) based on how well the education system meets the goals of the compact
 - Ensuring that there are tools to enforce the compact on both sides. Tools include transparency, rewards, and penalties or sanctions for failing to meet expectations. The compact is underpinned by a robust longitudinal data system.

While community involvement is essential for a fundamental realignment of public education, one aspect of the process is of grave concern. In terms of the “governance” of this reform, in almost all cases, educational practitioners of

higher education—the faculty—are either absent or an extreme minority. Richard Hersch, a senior fellow of the Council for Aid to Education, warns that the academy needs to become more engaged or see its traditional role diminish:

There is an academic leadership vacuum with regard to the issues of quality, accountability, and learning assessment, the recent book, *Our Underachieving Colleges* by Harvard's president Derek Bok, notwithstanding. That vacuum is understandably but ominously being filled by business, state and federal voices, a danger I hope we can avoid because faculty and administrators are potentially better placed and qualified to identify problems and make changes than outside groups. The test

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of leadership posed by the [Spellings] Commission, however, is a fair one and if the test is not passed by the Academy with flying colors there will be further erosion of both institutional control and the increasingly fragile notion of higher education as a public good.¹⁶

Thus far, the national P-16 effort has been driven by top-level management in postsecondary institutions, governmental agencies, business and industry leaders, and political office-holders. The movement involves P-12 teachers, community college instructors, state college and university faculty members, and P-16 education support professionals who serve only to perform specific functions on projects, not as essential players in the process. The situation in Nebraska mirrors these national trends.

Formally launched in 1999, the Nebraska P-16 Initiative is a joint initiative of the University of Nebraska and the Nebraska State Board of Education and, to date, has evolved through three stages of development: The first stage, from 1997 through 2000, was the foundation of the P-16 Initiative; the second stage, 2000 through 2004, featured early programmatic and structural design; and the third stage, from 2005 to the present, is one of institutional renewal and resurgence of the P-16 Initiative. Each developmental phase is distinct and each offers an insight regarding the dynamic of P-16 experiences.¹⁷

In 1997, the University of Nebraska's Board of Regents Academic Affairs Committee and the president of the University of Nebraska initiated talks of a P-16 partnership with the Nebraska State Board of Education. The Education Trust then sponsored retreats and conferences with representatives of both groups negotiating on key provisions for a P-16 partnership, including: teacher prepara-

tion for early childhood education; teacher recruitment and retention; curriculum and standards in teacher preparation; high school/postsecondary alignment; and articulation of curriculum and learning standards.

In fall 1999, both parties formed a P-16 Steering Committee and Statewide Advisory Council. Over the first eight months of 2000, the committee and council held organizational meetings and attended a NASH/Education Trust summer meeting in Utah. (A partnership of the National Association of System Heads [NASH] and the Education Trust provides support for a network of public higher education, K-12, and civic leaders who are implementing statewide K-16

The University of Nebraska 2000-04 Strategic Framework identified the goal of the university to be 'quality teaching and learning at all levels.'

improvement strategies in their states). In August 2000, the P-16 group expanded to include representatives of private colleges and universities in a working committee. In September, the working committee began discussions for a mathematics alignment project. Also in that month, the Nebraska Department of Education received approval from the U.S. Department of Education for a \$104,220 grant to support the Nebraska P-16 Initiative.¹⁸

By signing on to the P-16 Initiative, the University Board of Regents was acting within the terms of its 2000-04 Strategic Framework, which identified the primary goal of the university to be the promotion of “quality teaching and learning at all levels of university education, especially undergraduate education, to move the university into the nation’s top 30 public universities in providing quality education that is affordable and accessible.”¹⁹ Linked to that goal was the need “to formalize the P-16 Initiative.”²⁰ For the University of Nebraska, the P-16 dynamic is an integral factor in the future success of higher education in the state.

During the second stage (2000 through 2004), the P-16 Initiative expanded its structure, its membership, and published its first alignment documents. The Mathematics Alignment Task Force was joined by a Language Arts/English Task Force in late 2001. The following year, the Initiative hired its first full-time coordinator and, in 2003, established five regional P-16 councils across the state. Over these years, the representatives of the Nebraska community colleges and members of the state Coordinating Commission for Postsecondary Education began their participation. The Math Alignment document was published in November 2002, and the Language Arts document followed in August 2003.²¹

During this second stage of development, the Nebraska legislature also became a participant in the educational reform process and established the Task

Force on Higher Education to conduct an interim study of public higher education financing, guided by the following questions:

- What is the long-term sustainability of our current public higher education system in Nebraska?
- How do the missions of our community colleges, state colleges, and university system link, and what can be done to improve efficiencies within the Nebraska public higher education system?
- How many colleges and university campuses should the state support based on present and future demographics of the state?

The task force recommended that Nebraska increase the number of students who enter postsecondary education and the percentage who complete their degrees.

- How should state public higher education institutions be coordinated and governed?
- What proportion of tuition, private support, and tax dollars should be used to finance public higher education in Nebraska?
- What should be the focus of legislation in the next decade regarding public higher education?

The task force's primary recommendations: (1) increase the number of students who enter postsecondary education in Nebraska; (2) increase the percentage of students who successfully complete their degrees; (3) reduce, eliminate, and then reverse the net out-migration of Nebraskans with high levels of educational attainment; and (4) create a continuing Legislative Evaluation Task Force.²²

This state-level conversation about secondary and postsecondary education reform and the need to relate the P-16 initiative to the expansion and diversification of Nebraska's economy gave birth to FutureForce Nebraska in 2004. The stated purpose is to respond to the "perceived need for a neutral, third party entity to coordinate the workforce development efforts of private industry, government agencies and educational institutions."²³ FutureForce Nebraska has created a Talent Pipeline project that is organized by seven career clusters: Biotech, Construction, Entrepreneurship, Finance, Health Sciences, Industrial Manufacturing/Engineering, and Transportation. Each career cluster identifies "pathways from secondary school to two- and four-year colleges, graduate school, and the workplace."²⁴

During 2005, the Nebraska P-16 Initiative was "revitalized" with the creation of a new funding structure and new administrative partnership. This initiat-

ed the third stage of its development. The anchor organizations, the University of Nebraska, the Department of Education, and the private EducationQuest Fund each contributed \$50,000. Other organizations were asked to make a \$5,000 investment for their seats at the table.²⁵ A parallel development was the creation of the Governor's Nebraska Education Leadership Council, charged with improving "education from preschool through the workforce, incorporating leaders of the education community, the business community and the agricultural sector."²⁶

The revitalized P-16 Initiative hired a new coordinator and, working with the American Council on Education, the Ad Council, and the Lumina Foundation,

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the Initiative launched a "KnowHow2Go" college preparedness program in June 2007. It also prepared an extensive Nebraska P-16 Strategic Plan for 2008-2011 with the mission "to increase high school graduation, college going, and college graduation rates for all Nebraskans."²⁷

Finally, the Nebraska Legislature continued its involvement in higher education by creating the Legislative Evaluation Task Force on Higher Education and authorizing the Nebraska Coordinating Commission for Postsecondary Education to provide a report to the Legislature that evaluates "progress made toward the attainment of the priorities outlined by the Legislative Evaluation Task Force."²⁸ Each Nebraska community college, the state college, and the university produce a report in response to the legislative mandate.

Our case study illustrates the relatively common dynamic of the P-16 process. In the first stage, the genesis is around K-12 educational reform and the improvement of transition rates to higher education. The focus is on statewide curriculum reform, and the active agents are the Department of Education and the University of Nebraska. The second stage illustrates the expansion of institutional partnerships, the emphasis upon education as a driver of economic development, and the emergence of legislative factors aimed at aligning P-16 activities with statewide educational assessment and reform. The third stage finds expanded funding, more partnerships, and more institutionalization of P-16 as a process of an integrated, comprehensive strategic plan. Such a dynamic is a clear response to the challenge of the "governance divide" as the strategic plans address issues of access, accountability, affordability, and coordinated curriculum across the statewide educational grid.

Unfortunately, educators in secondary and postsecondary education institu-

tions are not making the academic decisions central to the P-16 efforts. Higher education faculty and secondary school teachers are not fully working together within the Nebraska State Education Association to define issues and create pathways between grades P-16 that enhance the educational opportunities of students and assist students in building wealth through Nebraska's economic development efforts.

Reflecting this challenge of broadly and effectively engaging teachers and faculty in the P-16 process, a report from the 2003 Nebraska leadership retreat noted that 75 teachers from K-12 and faculty from colleges and universities had partici-


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pated in the Mathematics and Language/Arts Alignment project. But the same report acknowledged that, relative to the overall P-16 Initiative, it was “still not well known among educators and citizens in the state.”²⁹

A key issue in the P-16 movement is that of the governance divide between the K-12 and higher education systems of public education. However, despite the illusion of committees and councils, responses to the governance challenge have been largely top-heavy initiatives crafted by administrative agents to the exclusion of faculty and teachers. Similar to efforts in healthcare reform, efforts to design, change, and impose any change upon the practitioners is unlikely to improve the situation.

With regard to this most crucial element, the National Education Association and its state affiliates are uniquely poised to meet the P-16 challenge. NEA member-practitioners are employed in a wide range of public education institutions from Pre-K through colleges and universities. Active members include faculty of all definitions: teachers, instructors, professors, tenured, adjunct, part-time, contingent, and full-time. Membership also incorporates academic professional staff and educational support professionals at all levels in public education. NEA members on both sides of the “divide” have links to the public education community at local, state, and national levels.

The challenge now is to engage the P-16 process and ensure that it becomes the opportunity for a true renaissance of public education. To this end, each state affiliate and local or chapter should consider some or all of the following activities. Learn about *your* P-16 situation. Engage *your* state P-16 movement by holding workshops to share concerns, ideas, and generate constructive suggestions for action. Become involved with regional councils and committees. Create state

affiliate sub-committees to learn about your P-16, and make recommendations for action to your state board. Discuss P-16 as a topic at your state-wide delegate assembly. Insist that public officials involved with P-16 provide you with reports, and insist that the process be transparent. Offer leadership on this topic to other organizations engaged with public education issues. Ultimately, address the national component of P-16 by discussing appropriate directions for the NEA leadership, and bring that voice to the Representative Assembly. In this way, the NEA membership can begin to collaborate with public officials and lead the way in creating a truly effective national opportunity for educational renewal and national progress. 

ENDNOTES

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