

Commissioner's Report on Higher Education
Developing a Statewide Strategy for P-16: Closing the Gaps Between
Public Education and Higher Education
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I am especially pleased to address the Board this morning on the issues of P-16 challenges and opportunities. I am most especially pleased to share this portion of the Board's agenda with my friend and educational partner, Commissioner Shirley Neeley. We arrived in our respective positions at approximately the same time two years ago and since then we have spoken regularly and passionately about raising academic achievement and expanding educational opportunity in Texas. I can tell you that Texas has no greater advocate for Closing the Gaps than Commissioner Neeley and she has been aggressive in aligning the work of the Texas Education Agency with its goals.

As a result of our discussions, Commissioner Neeley and I have determined to focus on three issues for particular collaboration: first, we have a long-term goal of creating a college-going culture in every public school in Texas – elementary, middle and high school. We want to work together to create grade-by-grade curricular and extracurricular activities that direct our students – with strong involvement from their families and communities – to post-secondary education. We know the vast majority of our families in Texas, affluent and poor, White, Hispanic and African American, want their children to enjoy the benefits of a college education and we want our schools to do all they can to help families realize their goals. For the small percentage of families and students who do not aspire to higher education, we want to communicate the message that college readiness largely correlates with workforce readiness and increases a young person's options as his or her career interests invariably change. Several years ago, Texas demonstrated both foresight and confidence in our youngsters by establishing a college-preparatory curriculum as the standard course of study in state high schools. Commissioner Neeley and I want to make certain that every child in Texas is ready and eager to benefit from this curriculum.

Our other priorities are to improve the rigor of the senior year in high school and to align high school exit and college-readiness standards. In regard to the senior year, and here we are referring to the 15-month block of time including the summers immediately before and after the actual academic year, public and higher education must work together to improve the college readiness of marginally prepared students and to increase the placement of well-prepared students in dual credit and advanced placement courses. Eventually, Commissioner Neeley and I would like to see our Texas high school students typically taking four rigorous years of English, mathematics, science and social studies and achieve fluency in a second language. This would place our Texas high schools on an equal footing with the best high schools in the world.

I am pleased to report that the staffs of the Texas Education Agency and the Higher Education Coordinating Board have in the last several months made very substantial progress on aligning high school exit and college-readiness standards. We have agreed on a definition of college-readiness – no small accomplishment – as the acquisition of the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in entry-level college courses and we have drawn up a preliminary timeline for both implementing and achieving college readiness. We are building on the excellent work already done in Texas and other parts of the country on this issue. Several weeks ago, staff from both agencies attended a presentation by Professor David Conley of the University of Oregon who has developed a college-readiness process and strategy as part of a project sponsored by the Association of American Universities. As a result of our work thus far, Commissioner Neeley and I, along with our colleagues at the two agencies, are convinced that rigorous, authentic college readiness is within the grasp of the vast majority of Texas youngsters of all backgrounds.

We also know that achieving widespread college-readiness in Texas, which is critical to our social, culture and economic well-being, will require a sea change in educational practice. Most of the focus on educational reform in Texas has been on the K-12 sector, but it is becoming increasingly clear, at both the state and national levels, that higher education must go about its work very differently as well. As you will hear this morning, many of the activities proposed to move us towards achieving the goals of Closing the Gaps are predicated on the establishment of an active network of local and regional P-16 councils which tailor educational strategies to particular needs and interests. Critical to the success of these councils will be an unprecedented level of sustained cooperation between public and higher education. We have examples of sustained, effective cooperation in several regions of the state but nothing at the scale necessary to reach our mutual educational goals. Among the primary elements of P-16 councils as conceptualized by TEA and Coordinating Board staff are disciplinary vertical teams composed of university and community college faculty as well as high school, middle and elementary school teachers working together to ensure rigor throughout the educational pipeline, to provide high levels of professional development and to develop innovative pedagogical strategies to address the needs and interests of an increasingly diverse group of students in virtually all our educational institutions.

Historically, the primary point of contact between higher education and the P-12 sector has been our schools of colleges of education. For example, the Arlington P-16 Council has been animated largely by the leadership of the College of Education at UT Arlington. We need to deepen these relationships still more so that K-12 representatives, from superintendents to principals to master teachers, are fully involved in teacher training, from helping to design the curriculum to instruction.

Beyond schools and colleges of education, we need both two- and four-year institutions to develop broad collaborations with K-12 schools. Much of what we want to see is already occurring: community colleges offer alternative teacher certification programs as a way of addressing the teacher shortages; two-year institutions have also taken the lead in offering dual-credit courses in high schools. The University of Texas at Austin has in place a highly successful teacher training programs for math and science majors called UTeach, which has both increased the number and quality of math and science majors going into K-12 teaching. As a state, we need to establish similar kinds of programs on university campuses.

As Board members know, by statute, this agency collects from each college and university an annual Uniform Recruitment and Retention Strategy. We will be relying more heavily on these documents to identify best practices for cooperative efforts with K-12 that can be replicated across the state. Coordinating Board staff will be working with campus leaders to ensure these documents reflect a genuine campus commitment to work closely with K-12 to improve college readiness and then to ensure that incoming students perform well academically and achieve their educational goals.

The key, of course, to this greater level of cooperation between higher and public education requires a significant level of participation by college and university faculty. To get the level of participation needed, campuses, especially those with a strong research orientation, will have to find ways to recognize and award such work. Higher education must find ways to acknowledge this kind of vital service when such service is measurable and when it demonstrates superior intellectual attainment. Distinguished service for the public good should be recognized and rewarded at every public institution.