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**The State Perspective**

***Preparation = Persistence: Re-Engineering the P-16 Spectrum***

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## PREPARATION = PERSISTENCE: RE-ENGINEERING THE P-16 SPECTRUM

Persistence and Success. Dropouts and Failure. We have won the semantic battle but lost the educational war. While K-12 has been vilified for its high drop-out rate, postsecondary education has largely been excused its relatively low “persistence” rate (although it appears the federal government intends to intrude in this arena during reauthorization). This strikes me as curious. After all, K-12 has students who have not chosen to be there, whereas postsecondary education is entirely voluntary. The physical environment, the modes of instruction, and the support systems all generally are superior in postsecondary institutions. Yet many postsecondary institutions have higher “drop-out” rates than many high schools. Furthermore, despite a number of institutional and/or state programs aimed at improving retention rates, there’s little evidence of substantial improvement.

My thesis today is that the only long-term solution to both the K-12 drop-out rate crisis and the poor postsecondary persistence rate is a comprehensive P-16 systematic approach. Furthermore, I will argue that unless we close the achievement gap across economic, and, therefore, disproportionately racial lines, we are doomed to a demographically-determined decline. Finally, I will suggest that even if we address the systematic preparation problems, we will still have to reshape postsecondary education from an industrial model to a knowledge model to mirror the transformation that has occurred in the economy. Such a transformation could truly engage a new generation of students in ways that could have a dramatic impact on persistence.

Now in approaching the topic so broadly, I am open to the charge that I’ve gone beyond the parameters of the conference. After all, this is a postsecondary conference. And I could easily talk about only postsecondary persistence programs, those that have worked, those that

have failed, and all those in-between. To do so, though, would be to ignore the realities. While multiple issues impact postsecondary persistence – personal, social, financial, and job opportunities, to name a few – we must focus on arguably the most important: academic preparation.

Starting with the return of the World War II veterans, American postsecondary education has been engaged in over fifty years of broadening access. In theory this has been a great success. Once the province of the privileged, postsecondary education opportunities have clearly been expanded to the middle-class and, to a lesser extent, to those in poverty. Yet the data would suggest that access without a reasonable chance of success perpetrates a fraud on students.

Georgia in the 1990's provides a good case study. In the first part of the decade, enrollment grew rapidly (180,000 – 206,000), but SAT scores, retention rates, and degree production increased much more moderately and the percentage of students needing remediation increased to nearly a third. A series of policy choices, program initiatives, and financial incentives were implemented in the mid-1990's, all aimed at increasing student success. These included:

- The HOPE Scholarship program, providing free tuition to college for all those with a B-average in high school, as long as they maintained the B-average in college.
- Raising admission standards over a 5-year period.
- Phasing out remedial programs for immediate high school graduates at all four-year schools and placing a limit at two-year schools.
- Implementing a supplemental after-school and summer program for all 8<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> graders in at-risk situations (PREP).

- Creating a P-16 agenda focused on transitions, collaboration, student achievement, and teacher preparation.

The results have been impressive:

- SAT scores rose from 981-1029.
- 1500-1600 SAT scorers attending University of System of Georgia institutions rose from 26%-75%.
- Remedial dropped from 31% to 17%.
- The percentage of students taking college prep curriculum rose from 75% to 93%.

Persistence rates and, ultimately, graduation rates are increasing significantly also.

My point is that if Georgia had simply chosen to address postsecondary persistence through a number of institution-based retention programs alone, the impact on persistence and success statewide would neither have been significant nor sustained.

This is not to diminish these programs. Some like the Freshman Seminars, pioneered by John Gardner when he was at the University of South Carolina, have played an important role – not the least being that we signal to students that we care about their success when they're most vulnerable. Others like supplemental instruction in “at-risk courses” (that is, courses with high rates of failure) have also had good results. In addition, Honors programs play an important role in the persistence of high achieving students (whose persistence rates tend to be below predicted rates, arguably because of boredom). Worthy as they are, however, these types of programs cannot alone bring systematic change to a state's educational well-being.

And, good intentions aside, college persistence programs (particularly remedial ones) have largely been extraordinarily costly and relatively ineffective (although there are anecdotal exceptions). While they are crucial for returning adults, remedial programs for recent high school graduates undermine what we know to be true: that the best and most equitable preparation for college is to take a rigorous college-preparatory curriculum in high school taught by a teacher qualified in the content area.

Unfortunately, not all children have an equal opportunity to have such a curriculum or such teachers. Too few children of parents in the bottom quartile of income ever take, for example, an 8<sup>th</sup> grade college preparatory algebra class – a class demonstrated to be a gateway and an equalizer to college success. Too many of these children are taught by unqualified teachers (over a third). We should not be surprised, then, given income disparities, that only just over half of black and Hispanic children graduate from high school contrasted to over three-quarters of white students. College participation rates lag, also, as do persistence rates for those who do enroll.

Some researchers claim that over half of the achievement gap exists before a child enters first grade. They suggest that the vocabulary of a third-grader from a high income family is larger than the vocabulary of a parent of a third-grader from a family on welfare. Pre-K knowledge of everything from the alphabet to colors can largely predetermine whether a child will ever go to college. It is little wonder, then, that more and more states are investing in pre-K programs (Georgia for example, has a universal pre-K program) with academic content.

States have disproportionately funded K-12 over postsecondary education in the last decade. This, I predict, will accelerate with the dismal state funding picture. And indeed, it will be compounded by the newly emerging pre-K priority. Public colleges appear to be responding

in the traditional manner: waiting it out through a combination of temporary cuts and permanent and significant tuition increases. Such tactics will not only have a detrimental impact on persistence (and equity of opportunity), but they will also delay the inevitable total re-engineering of colleges and universities.

The industrial model of awarding degrees based on the accumulation of a certain number of credits, earned in 15-week blocks, in distinct courses, from departmentally-based faculty cannot be sustained. The new model must be based on any-time, any-place learning. It must replace time being the constant and learning the variable with learning being the constant and time the variable. It must see the end of the lecture as we now know it and the beginning of faculty as facilitators of learning. Technology is far superior at presenting information than most faculty. It cannot, however, turn information into knowledge and knowledge into wisdom. Only faculty, in much looser constructs than today, can do that. The new model needs to ensure that faculty spend the majority of their time on intellectual matters, something few, if any, universities could claim today. Revolutionary.

Admission to college would be based on demonstrated skills and knowledge, learned in a curriculum aligned from high school to college (another P-16 priority, already well developed in states such as Oregon). The next natural step would be to award degrees on the same basis: what a student knows and can do. Revolutionary. These changes would lead to a much more dynamic and, yes, chaotic (as the knowledge age is itself) environment. Yet it would be an environment familiar to this generation of students, and one that would be much more likely to engage them and lead to far superior persistence rates.

I would argue, then, at significant risk of being disinvented (disavowed, defrocked, excommunicated, whatever) that states, faced with punishing choices of what to do with

declining resources, should invest their resources in improving equitably the academic preparation of students from pre-K to 12<sup>th</sup> grade and in providing universities with constructive resources to play a key role in a vigorous state P-16 effort and to re-engineer themselves. States should divest themselves from marginal persistence programs that are often too little, too late anyway. The same arguments hold for a financial aid system that should collapse under its own weight and an accreditation system that is both expensive and self-serving without demonstrable value added. But those are topics for future conferences!