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Articulation, Alignment and The Challenge of College-Readiness

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Introduction

It is a pleasure to have this opportunity to speak with you today. Nothing could be more important today—when a postsecondary credential is the gateway to economic success—than reassessing how higher education can do a better job serving all its students, the public that funds it, and the nation in which we live.

Articulation—or, more broadly, the alignment between the courses, programs, standards, and expectations of different educational levels—is critical to the improvement of higher education. Efficiency, productivity, affordability, and outcomes are all affected by the mis-alignments that exist between secondary and postsecondary expectations (and between sectors within higher education). In fact, better alignment across systems makes a lot of the "retail level" articulation work less necessary.

Today, I want to share with you lessons that we are learning at my organization, Jobs for the Future, from two foundation-funded initiatives that bear on strategies to improve articulation and alignment: the Early College High School initiative, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation; and the Achieving the Dream initiative, funded by the Lumina Foundation for Education here in Indianapolis, as well as the KnowledgeWorks and Nellie Mae Foundations.

The ambitious Early College High School initiative has already created over 80 new small schools that combine secondary and postsecondary learning in the same school, resulting in both a high school diploma and an associates degree or significant credits toward a degree. The plan is for over 200 new schools by 2011. These schools are being created by about a dozen organizations, including state groups like North Carolina's New Schools Project and national groups like the National Council of La Raza and the Woodrow Wilson Foundation. Jobs for the Future is the lead organization coordinating this work, with responsibility for: providing support and assistance to the entities that are creating the new schools, managing the information system that tracks student outcomes, and addressing policy challenges facing these new schools.

Jobs for the Future is a Boston-based research and policy organization committed to the educational and economic advancement of youth and adults struggling in today's economy. JFF's initiatives are designed to strengthen opportunities for youth to succeed in postsecondary learning and high-skill employment and to increase low-income adults' opportunities to move into family-supporting careers. www.jff.org.

Achieving the Dream is an exciting new postsecondary education reform initiative, involving 35 community colleges in 7 states (CT, FL, NC, NM, OH, TX, VA). The focus is on using the analysis of outcome data to develop institution-wide reform strategies to improve student success, particularly for first-generation, low-income, and students of color. In this initiative, JFF's role is to organize state policy activities and support for the institutional change agendas of participating colleges and to support state policy changes that promote community college student success.

Both initiatives provide important insights into how the relationship between high school and postsecondary institutions might be improved so that more students move easily and quickly into college and credential programs that they will complete. I will elaborate on some of these lessons and their implications for the Commission's deliberations.

Why Articulation Matters to College Performance

If you Google *articulation,* most of the references are to diction and speech patterns. Educators are likely to describe articulation accurately. As one college website explains, it's "a process which enables students to make a smooth transition…without delay, duplication of courses, or loss of semester credits." Articulation refers to negotiated agreements between institutions: "We have articulated courses or programs with 40 different high schools and six different four-year institutions," a two-year college might boast. Too often, though, those agreements simply sit in files, publicized to few, and driving little change in behavior of individuals or institutions.

Articulation is really part of a broader and critically important concern: the relationship between high schools and post-secondary institutions (or between different levels within higher education). The mis-alignment of institutional expectations, standards, curricula and outcomes from K-12 to higher education is the reason articulation agreements are now needed. More important, this mis-alignment is at the heart of the poor performance of many students who enter higher education and of many higher education institutions. Minimizing it must be at the core of any effort to improve student success, efficiency, and productivity in higher education.

In his testimony to the Commission in December, Mike Cohen of Achieve, Inc. summarized the extent to which the disconnects between secondary and postsecondary education pose problems for higher education.

> Only 34% of ninth graders graduate from high school "college ready"—having taken the courses typically required for admission to nonselective four-year colleges
>
> Nearly 30% of first year college students must take at least one remedial course; in community colleges, the average is over 40%; in urban and rural colleges, it can be well over 80%.

A recent analysis of the NELS longitudinal data by Jobs for the Future corroborates the lack of clear and smooth alignment between K-12 and higher education systems. While 43% of all high school graduates leave at least somewhat qualified for college (using the Department of Education's definition), for students whose families are in the second lowest SES quintile, the rate drops to 29%. And among low-income students, those in the lowest socioeconomic quintile, only 19% are at least somewhat qualified for college.

This is unacceptable. Being academically underprepared to succeed in higher education is among the strongest predictors of failure in college—more powerful than socioeconomic status, race or gender. Huge numbers of unqualified and minimally qualified students from all economic backgrounds enroll in college, particularly in community colleges; but only 32% of unqualified students who enroll in college and 45% of minimally qualified enrollees ever earn a degree. That contrasts with 61% of somewhat qualified and 76% of highly qualified enrollees. Not surprisingly, lower-income students are especially likely to be unqualified for college—and not to complete.

In the past, colleges tended to feel that poor preparation was a K-12 problem. But it is not. Improving college results requires clear and close alignment of expectations, standards, signals about what "college ready" means, and collaborative mechanisms for raising student performance in high school. It requires collaboration at the institution, system, state, and federal levels to reverse decades of limited interaction between K-12 and higher education.

Over time, improving the alignment between systems will reduce the amount of remediation needed and improve retention and completion rates.

But helping to improve high school quality and performance is not sufficient. Colleges must also look to their own practices and policies, to the ways in which they try to help those who are not college-ready catch up and succeed. And policymakers must look for ways to help colleges be more effective in teaching underprepared students. This is particularly critical for community colleges, where developmental education can be a bigger enterprise than many majors or occupational specialties.

In these remarks, I highlight two important lessons from the efforts of schools, colleges, and states with which we work closely.The implications of the experience of these innovators go far beyond the unwieldy negotiation of articulation agreements to strategies for making smooth transitions and progress more routine. I will address:

1) The power of "college in high school" to improve outcomes for underprepared high school students; and
2) The value of using longitudinal outcomes data to target and support higher student success, particularly in programs serving developmental students.

The Power of College in High School

A number of recommendations have been made to the Commission already on the issue of better articulation between secondary and postsecondary systems. David Conley of the University of Oregon and others have suggested ways that states can require more collaboration between secondary and postsecondary systems, particularly on state high school exams and graduation requirements. Conley also suggested coordinating college placement testing with state high school exams. We agree with these suggestions.

Our experience leads us to a complementary set of recommendations that can be characterized as harnessing "the power of college in high school." This includes Advanced Placement, a subject that Gov. Caperton addresses so well. It also includes a range of what are sometimes called postsecondary enrollment options or dual enrollment programs. And, finally, it includes small schools where the integration of college learning and secondary learning is a basic component of school design.

The attractiveness of gaining access to college level learning and college credits while still in high school is clear. The number of AP courses taught each year is soaring. About 40 states now have programs to encourage dual enrollment of high school students in college courses. Strategies for integrating college experience into the high school curriculum are proliferating.

How the less well-prepared can also benefit
Most of the beneficiaries of these initiatives are already college-bound students, typically with good grades and test scores. Our experience indicates that this does not have to be the case. The power of college in high school can benefit a broad segment of high school students, including those who start high school reading and doing math below grade level. The payoff for the most disadvantaged students can be quite significant.

College Now is a dual enrollment program for New York City public school students in the CUNY two- and four-year system that has grown to serve about 32,000 students annually from 200 high schools, taking courses at 17 different CUNY campuses. Early findings show that College Now students who go on to CUNY AA or BA programs have one-year retention rates that are greater than peers who did not take college courses while in high school. College Now students earn more credits in their first year of college than do their non-College Now colleagues.

Importantly, a student's level of academic preparedness does not lessen the advantage. Less prepared students who participate in College Now also outperform their peers. (One reason is that College Now students who do not do well on the Regents exams are able to access college-provided remediation courses to catch up—without waiting until they graduate high school and start at CUNY.)

The Early College High Schools that are being created with Gates Foundation investment are structured so that their students —primarily lower-performing entrants to high school—are able to catch up and then complete as much as 60 credits of college by the

end of four to five years. These schools are still too young to have definitive outcome data. However, there are indications from several pioneering schools that make the college experience part of high school that, if designed right, these models can help students succeed who were initially not seen as college-bound.

The schools of the Middle College National Consortium, which are typically located on the campuses of colleges and work closely with college leadership and faculty, have shown promising results. Interim outcomes from 10 of these schools show that 81% of students were enrolled in college courses in the fall of 2003-04, and 96% of them passed their college courses. At LaGuardia Middle College in New York, about three-quarters of the first cohort of early college high school students have already earned or are on track to earn their AA degree by the summer of 2006—that is, within 5 years of their entry as high school freshmen. These students—who are overwhelmingly minority and low-income—will all leave the school with a high school diploma and at least 15 college credits.

Perhaps the most innovative and successful school we have worked with in the University Park Campus School in Worcester, Massachusetts, a phenomenal partnership between the Worcester Public Schools, the local community, and Clark University. The small grade 7-12 school, now in its ninth year, has the profile of a typical urban high school: 73% receive free or reduced lunch; 67% are English Language Learners; 61% are students of color. But the neighborhood school has results that few schools in the Commonwealth can beat. Every member of its first three graduating classes has passed the MCAS exam on the first try and gone on to college, the first member of their family to do so. UPCS ranked first among all urban schools serving low-income students on the MCAS exams, with the overwhelming majority passing at proficient or advanced levels.

Bringing alignment to life

What is University Park's secret? It is, in part, believing that every student can learn and succeed and treating them that way; and, in part, starting with students in the seventh grade. From the Commission's perspective, though the key is integration of college level work into the high school experience and the deep collaboration and communication between university and high school on expectations, curriculum, and instruction

The education school at Clark has created curriculum alignment teams in each discipline comprised of college and UPCS teachers. These teams work together, looking at data, student work, and classroom practices. They look for ways to align the curriculum with college expectations and standards and for ways that teachers can get students ready for college. Almost all juniors and seniors take at least one college course at Clark. By the time they leave high school, they have college experience, are ready academically—and they have internalized a sense of themselves as "college material."

This level of personal interaction across the sectors is key. It is what makes UPCS and Early College models so effective—and why the experience of college in high school is so powerful. It is not just about opportunity for students. It is about communication and personal interaction among adults responsible for students' preparation that brings the

alignment of expectations, standards, and curriculum alive, part of the daily calibration of quality and effective practice. This is the ultimate power of bringing these two worlds together. For the Commission, the challenge is how to encourage this kind of interaction more broadly and routinely.

To summarize implications and recommendations for the Commission:

Address Mis-Alignment of Standards and Expectations

- Alignment between high schools and postsecondary expectations is essential to improving college outcomes—and postsecondary institutions and systems must be engaged and proactive.

  States should carefully align high school exit tests, graduation requirements, college placement exams, and the signals that high schools get about what it takes to succeed in college. They should involve college and high school personnel in the process of aligning and communicating expectations.

Create Greater Transparency

- Transparency—clear presentation of college standards and of what is expected of students—is critical to student preparation for college and success. The Commission should consider ways to make state postsecondary placement tests easily accessible to high school students who want to know what it means to be "college-ready." Many colleges are working with local high schools to assess students early. Another option to explore is a website where students can take practice placement exams and have their results analyzed.

Promote More Coherent Programs Offering College in High School

- The structure of alignment is important; but it must be filled in with effective and cost-effective models of schools and of secondary-postsecondary collaboration that work—not just for those already likely to succeed in college, but also those who are not. State and federal policymakers can reward dual enrollment programs that make college in high school not just a course-by-course option but rather part of a comprehensive, high quality college-readiness strategy. They can also remove policy barriers to expansion of quality dual enrollment programs.

  Integrating high school and college learning in coherent programs and schools can force the kinds of conversations and changes in curriculum and instruction that make a real difference. Federal and state policy should promote secondary level initiatives that make college learning part of a coherent program to accelerate and ensure college readiness.

  One approach might be a demonstration program that tests the power of different school models that integrate college and high school to spur more efficient preparation for college success and accelerated progress to and through degree programs. State and federal governments could create incentives for colleges and universities, particularly those with education schools, to create new high schools

like University Park, to locate high schools on their campuses, and to promote the collaboration and deliberation about college-readiness skills and expectations.

In creating incentives that promote a core curriculum in high school, the federal government should consider specifying that a core curriculum include some amount of college coursework while in high school. This would give a big boost to what is now a huge, but poorly aligned, movement for college in high school.

Use College in High School to Accelerate Learning for Underprepared Students

- Providing opportunities to experience college, earn college credits, and get college-ready while in high school can increase both access and success for students who have fallen behind. As the federal and state governments consider ways to promote broader access to (and success in) Advanced Placement courses for lower-income students, they should consider parallel efforts to support expansion of dual enrollment programs to a broader segment of high school students.

The Value of Longitudinal Outcomes Data for Improving College Retention

Community colleges have particularly low persistence and completion rates. According to the Community College Research Center, of all first-time community college students who enrolled in 1995, only 36% had earned a certificate, AA or BA degree within six years. Completion rates for minorities and low-income students are lower than the average for all students.

At the same time, the community college is the primary locus for postsecondary opportunity for huge numbers of Americans who would otherwise have no access to college. About 45% of college freshmen begin in community colleges. For adult learners, the community college is overwhelmingly the higher education institution of choice.

Any effort to improve postsecondary education in the United States must focus significant attention on this uniquely American and critically important institution, so that its students can succeed and move on educationally and economically. From our experience with colleges and state systems, we would argue that any effort to strengthen community college performance must include—and perhaps start from—markedly improved systems for collecting, analyzing, and using longitudinal data on students as they move into and through these institutions.

How longitudinal data systems and analysis can promote better results

The 35 colleges in the Lumina Foundation-funded Achieving the Dream initiative are committed to improving student outcomes. They—and their state systems and associations—want to use student data to pinpoint weaknesses and drive improvement. In most states and colleges, there are severe limits to this approach. These limits are the result of current data collection and reporting systems and also the capacity of most

institutions and state agencies to use data to inform and guide continuous improvement. (It was a great choice to have Jay Pfeiffer of Florida moderate this panel. His is one of the few states that has over time built a longitudinal data system to track students that is robust, flexible, links many different public systems, and provides the state with extremely valuable analyses.)

Achieving the Dream community colleges and state systems see the IPEDS reporting requirements on persistence and completion for first-time, full-time students as inadequate. In a state like New Mexico, the Student Right to Know data leaves out over 90% of enrollments in the state's community colleges. This reporting system created for four-year colleges is not sufficiently robust for two-year institutions and their complex missions and populations. Without supplementary measures of progress and ways to track a broader segment of enrolled students, Student Right to Know data hides as much as it reveals about community college performance.

There are two critical areas where existing data systems pose particular challenges to improvement—and to better alignment. One is tracking of the progress of students who start college taking developmental courses. The other is data on students who transfer from community colleges to four-year institutions.

Developmental education as key arena for improved outcomes

As the community colleges participating in Achieving the Dream have developed their institutional improvement workplans in the past year, every college has identified the quality and outcomes of developmental education courses and high-enrollment introductory courses as a top priority. The most common target for improvement is developmental math.

This makes sense. For it is in developmental education that many students begin and end their college careers. At least 20% of traditional age community college, students who generally enroll for a degree, never earn even ten college credits—largely because they never make it out of developmental courses. As Department of Education researcher Cliff Adelman has found, the more developmental education classes a student needs to take, the greater the odds of not earning a credential. Developmental education is the key battleground for improvement in community colleges.

But there are real gaps in basic knowledge about developmental education outcomes in most institutions and states. What is the likelihood of earning a degree if you enter college with particular scores on college placement tests? Are there significant variations in outcomes for students from different high schools, ethnic groups, different English language skills, family incomes? Do certain ways of organizing and delivering instruction increase the rates of persistence and college success?

The information is not always easy to get. Many states do not collect placement test score data or track students through different levels of developmental education. In many states, placement standards vary widely from college to college, making it impossible to compare the progress of developmental students in different colleges. And, as recent research by the

Community College Research demonstrates, many colleges and states lack the research capacity and sophistication to use available data effectively for improvement.

Achieving the Dream colleges and states are taking steps to improve the collection and use of more robust data. This commitment should be encouraged in other states and colleges.

The colleges are testing innovations in how courses are taught and delivered and how at-risk students are supported: they will be using the research results to determine whether to expand or end their experiments. For example, Brookhaven College in Texas is testing an intensive learning community model for 60 entering students whose assessment scores place them in the lowest levels of developmental reading, writing, and math.

Given the rudimentary state of knowledge, it is important that institutions and states be encouraged to promote and test innovative approaches, rather than either rush to adopt unproven strategies or be forced to improve outcomes without a clear roadmap for how best to proceed. State and federal incentives and innovation funding can help to improve students' initial experiences in higher education. For one thing is clear: students who make it past one year of community college have much greater odds of completion.

The seven states have made a commitment to work together to develop and test supplementary measures of student progress. (Other states are considering joining this effort.) They are particularly interested in measures that can shine a light on developmental education outcomes. Initially, they intend to test outcomes indicators that capture progress of all students who take a developmental education course from their entry into the college through their completion of the equivalent of a semester of credit courses. This supplemental measure would help states and institutions assess the efficiency and efficacy of developmental education programs to move students to and through credential programs, augmenting the limited data available through IPEDS.

Jay Pfeiffer's colleagues at the Florida Department of Education recently conducted two compelling analyses of state data. The first looks at the relationship between students' scores on the state high school exam and on the CPT placement test used in the state community colleges, showing a high correlation between scores of 3 or higher and college readiness. A second analysis looks at the impact of 3-credit student success courses on student retention and completion. Though more research is needed, the comparisons between students who took such a study and navigational skills course and those who did not points to a potentially important strategy for improving persistence and success.

This kind of analysis is powerful: it is also rare. Incentives and support for state and institutional research capacity could have a big payoff.

Better data can also identify policy changes that might make a difference. The Community College of Denver, for example, has demonstrated good results with a strategy that enables students to advance through up to three levels of developmental education in one semester by virtue of passing exit exams for each level. What makes this

work is a state policy to reimburse the school the full amount for each level taken (after placement determined by a pre-test), providing an incentive to accelerate student progress through the levels. What makes it compelling is the evidence of improved outcomes.

Data on transfers increasingly important

A second area of concern and opportunity is data on transfer students and their performance in four-year institutions. This is particularly important given the emerging interest in expanding the role of community colleges as feeders to four-year schools for reasons of cost, affordability, and access. Community colleges want to know whether their standards and instruction are aligned with the expectations of four-year institutions for their juniors and seniors. How do students who transfer perform? Are there areas where their preparation is inadequate? Are students who receive certain kinds of pre-transfer counseling and support more successful? Does common course numbering across a state's institutions make a difference in the relative smoothness of the transition?

In many states, it is hard to know the answer to what seem like basic questions. As Peter Ewell of NCHEMS found in a recent study for Achieving the Dream and the Ford-funded Bridges to Opportunity initiative, some states can track these transfers on a unit record basis, but many can only obtain aggregate information on former two-year college enrollees who have re-enrolled at four-year institutions. Privacy issues (principally associated with FERPA) limit the ability to link or exchange data in a number of states, particularly in states where community colleges and four-year institutions are administered under different governing arrangements, but also when student data are maintained by SHEEO agencies. (Similar privacy-related concerns have led to limitations in the ways linkages can be established with UI-wage records in some states.) These obstacles must be addressed if alignment of two- and four-year institutions' expectations is to be strengthened.

To summarize lessons and recommendations regarding data systems from a community college perspective:

Strengthen Longitudinal Student Data Systems

- Longitudinal data systems that connect K-12, two- and four-year higher education, the UI employment system, and non-credit postsecondary learning systems like adult education and workforce programs are critical to improving higher education performance. These systems should disaggregate by important population characteristics: age, gender, race/ethnicity, family income/need, full/part-time status, first generation status, etc.

  The Achieving the Dream states would generally argue against a national system at this time, partly for reasons of anticipated backlash and partly because of fears that the federal government will make it harder, not easier, for states to get the information they feel they need and that federal priorities will crowd out the states' interest in improvement. I think there should ultimately be a national system, given the mobility of students across institutions and states. But such a

system must be designed with and be helpful to state offices responsible for collection and use of data.

Encourage Additional Indicators of Student Progress, Particularly for Underprepared Students

- Supplemental indicators to Student Right to Know completion rates are needed. Achieving the Dream states are exploring the testing of measures that provide much more information, particularly regarding progress into and out of developmental education through a semester or so of college courses. State and federal policy can encourage development and testing of high-value indicators within and across states.

Remove Obstacles to Collecting Data on Transfer Students' Progress

- Privacy concerns are significant; but many states have found ways to protect privacy while promoting more flexible access to student record data for institutional improvement and accountability purposes. The federal government can help clarify legal issues, hopefully in ways that promote rather than restrict access by two-year institutions to data on their transfer students.

Provide Support for State and Institutional Research Capacity

- State and institutional capacity to use data effectively for improvement is limited, except for rare exceptions. States should consider ways to deepen their own and their institutions' ability to use student data effectively. States may want to take some reporting and analysis burdens off inadequately staffed institutions. The federal government should consider ways to promote more effective institutional and state-level research on outcomes, for both accountability and improvement purposes.

  Careful research on institutional innovation can help identify programmatic and structural improvement approaches that should be implemented more widely. An innovation fund that is managed at the state level and flows to institutions for testing innovations' effectiveness should be considered.

Together, these two sets of recommendations—about ways that secondary and postsecondary institutions can best collaborate to align college-readiness expectations and standards; and ways in which better data systems and data use can drive improved developmental education and credential program outcomes—can have an important impact on the priorities of the Commission: access and success for less prepared students; college affordability for students and the public sector; and accountability systems that are transparent and that drive improvement.

Thank you for this opportunity to speak with you.