

THE BRIDGE PROJECT:

Strengthening K-16 Transition Policies

A project of the Stanford Institute for Higher Education Research made possible by the generous support of The Pew Charitable Trusts. Additional support is provided by the National Center for Postsecondary Improvement and its sponsor, the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement.

The Bridge Project: Strengthening K-16 Transition Policies builds on the view that reforms affecting K-12 and higher education must occur across systems in order to achieve the desired outcomes. Reforms developed in isolation from each other can lead to mismatched policy objectives and send confusing messages to education stakeholders. The overarching purpose of the project is to improve opportunities for all students to enter and succeed in higher education by strengthening the compatibility between higher education admissions and placement requirements and K-12 curriculum frameworks, standards, and assessments. Our research will help educational institutions and federal, state, and local agencies accomplish this goal by providing descriptive analyses of the policies as well as disjunctures that exist in the current policy environment, and detailed analyses of ways to improve current systems. Toward this end, we will formulate both short- and long-term policy and practice recommendations.

To accomplish these goals, our research:

- Focuses on three understudied but essential components of the K-16 system—admissions policies, freshman placement or advising policies, and curriculum content and assessment standards in community colleges, selective universities, and less selective universities.

- Examines regions in six states—California, Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, Oregon, and Texas—to understand the dynamics within each state and to offer a comparative framework among states.

- Focuses on ways to improve the delivery of information and policy signals for all students.

- Includes stakeholders from all aspects of the K-16 system: K-12 students and their parents; and educators and researchers at state agencies, higher education institutions, school districts, and high schools. This will ensure that the perspectives of all stakeholders are included and will provide rich contextual information on which to base policy recommendations.

- Will lead to the development of policy recommendations and a self-study protocol(s) that other researchers, educators, and policymakers can use to assess such K-16 linkages in their own state.

THE PROBLEM

While educators and policymakers share the common goal of improving student performance, they often act in isolation; thus, efforts are sometimes conflicting or duplicated, and often certain needs are never addressed. This is not the fault of a particular set of people or institutions. Rather, the current organization of secondary schools and universities is such that communication between levels is often difficult, if not impossible. Reform initiatives at different levels within the entire K-16 education system must be better integrated or the whole mission of increasing opportunities for all students for higher education could veer dangerously off course.

The lack of compatibility between K-12 and higher education policies and practices causes many problems. For example, in 1995, nearly all U.S. public two-year institutions and 81 percent of public four-year institutions offered remedial courses; in the fall of 1995, 29 percent of the nation's first-time college students enrolled in at least one remedial reading, writing, or mathematics course. These statistics point to a possible disjuncture between K-12 and higher education. If K-12 educators, students, and parents had a better understanding of what students should know and be able to do to enter college, remediation rates might be lower. For instance, in the southeastern U.S., there are nearly 125 combinations of 75 different placement tests, oftentimes devised by university departments without enough regard to secondary school standards. Entering first-year students know little about the content of these exams; this could lead to poor scores on placement exams and the need for remediation. This lack of compatibility creates problems for students, such as increased costs and length of stay in undergraduate programs. It increases costs and administrative burdens for institutions of higher education as well. This situation is particularly troubling for traditionally underrepresented and economically disadvantaged students because they often do not have family members who are familiar with higher education, and often lack the resources needed to hire private counselors and tutors to help them navigate the K-16 transition successfully.

Thus, the current array of policies sends vague and confusing signals to students about what is required to succeed at colleges and universities. Moreover, a lack of compatibility between assessment mechanisms could be a major problem for students who attend high schools that stress performance assessments including written expression, portfolios, and problem solving. When those students enter college, they are often faced with more traditional forms of teaching and learning such as standardized multiple choice tests and lectures.

THE RESEARCH

The research conducted for the project will focus on policies, perceptions, and practices relating to the transition of students from secondary to higher education. The project is composed of three phases, which incorporate a series of research methodologies, including interviews, focus groups, document review, and surveys:

Phase I. In an effort to understand current state-level K-12 policies and state and institutional policies regarding higher education, this phase provides an analysis of K-16 policies and practices in regions within six states: California, Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, Oregon, and Texas. Phase I seeks to answer the following main research questions: What are the formal and informal state-level K-12 and higher education institutional K-16-related policies and practices in

each of the six states? What are specific higher education institutions' policies regarding undergraduate admission and placement? How compatible are the K-16 standards and assessments in terms of their content, objectives, and specifications? In seeking to answer these questions, Phase I research will include an analysis of the signals and incentives sent by existing K-16 policies as well as a content and format analysis of high school exit and college entrance assessments in Bridge study states.

Phase II. This phase seeks to understand how higher education admissions standards and placement policies are communicated to, and interpreted by, secondary school-level educators, parents, and students in each of the six states. It also provides an analysis of policy communication processes utilized by, and the consequent understandings of, different student groups.

Phase III. To help reconceptualize existing policies and propose new policies, Bridge staff will utilize project findings and research from other studies to produce a set of short- and long-term policy recommendations and an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of these policy recommendations.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO IMPROVED POLICIES AND PRACTICES

In order to improve current K-16 policies and practices, the project's research and outreach agenda will:

- Expand knowledge and research about the linkages between K-12 and higher education, focusing on undergraduate admissions and placement policies and practices.

- Evaluate and analyze recent large-scale changes in undergraduate admissions and placement policies within a comparative framework.

- Explore the potential impact of new concepts such as performance assessment in undergraduate admissions.

- Conduct a comparison of K-12 and higher education assessments in Bridge study states to uncover inconsistencies that generate confusing signals for students.

- Create a forum for researchers and practitioners to share ideas, discuss policy options, and identify priorities for further research.

- Convene and lead local, state, and national discussions to rethink current policies and practices and formulate recommendations for specific national, state, local, and institutional contexts.

- Convene discussions with local educators on issues of early outreach, tracking, and other equity-based policies geared to recruit and prepare traditionally underrepresented and economically disadvantaged students for college.

- Provide protocols or templates for states to analyze the compatibility of assessments across their educational systems and to conduct a self-assessment of their own K-16 policy environment.

Our outreach and dissemination agenda is designed to inform a variety of audiences, including parents and students, K-16 researchers and policymakers; higher education researchers and practitioners; and K-12 and postsecondary administrators, counselors, and teachers. This agenda will be accomplished through coordinated outreach activities and a series of publications. A regularly updated website (www.stanford.edu/group/bridgeproject) will make our research findings and publications widely available, and will allow for greater communication and feedback with our target audiences.

MANAGEMENT

The project is managed by Professor Michael Kirst, Associate Director of the Stanford Institute for Higher Education Research (SIHER), and by Project Director Andrea Venezia. Additional assistance is provided by Associate Professor Patricia Gumpert, Director of SIHER and Executive Director of the National Center for Postsecondary Improvement (NCPI) and Christopher Roe, Managing Director of SIHER and Associate Director of NCPI. A Steering Committee made up of experts on K-16 educational issues will oversee the management of the project. Members include:

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