

Aligning Secondary and Postsecondary Education Lessons from the Past

By Marc VanOverbeke

KEY POINTS

1. High schools and colleges are distinct institutions that, over time, filled different purposes, and these differences must be recognized when crafting educational policies.
2. Reformers need to create structures that provide opportunities for meaningful interaction.
3. The process of reform today needs to be dynamic, one in which both levels accept the responsibility to make changes and revisions.

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Educators, reformers, and commissions have long underscored the need to align all levels of education and build a seamless, coordinated P-16 system. Failing to do so, they have argued, has kept too many students from pursuing an advanced education and the nation from benefiting from a more educated populace. Such was the case in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when reformers first began to wrestle with the proper alignment of America's loose educational structure. For example:

- New England's educators claimed at their 1877 annual meeting that the lack of alignment between secondary and higher education is "a very serious evil." ...the nation's governors and other reformers continue to argue that we need to align standards and missions between secondary and higher education.
- Similarly, Charles W. Eliot, Harvard's president, argued in 1894 that we need to "establish a closer connection between secondary schools and colleges."
- And, as the Carnegie Foundation pointed out in 1909, "what we call the American educational system is composed of a number of separate institutions, each originally built up for some specific purpose and without particular reference to any of the others."¹

Now, one hundred years later, the nation's governors and other reformers continue to argue that we need to align standards and missions between secondary and higher education. Bill and Melinda Gates have tried to lead the campaign for reform through their foundation, and the recent U.S. Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education has called for greater cooperation between secondary and higher education.²



Charles W. Eliot was an American academic and higher education reformer who was selected as president of Harvard University in 1869.

These efforts are the latest in a long history of reform. In this brief, I consider this history and the lessons it offers for today. History will not provide answers to current challenges, but it can help us better comprehend the complexity of these challenges and raise crucial questions and issues that need to be addressed. As such, history can increase the probability of success as we continue efforts to align secondary and higher education.

Different Histories, Traditions, and Cultures

Rather than evolving as part of a coherent, hierarchical system, secondary schools and colleges in the United States developed in unique ways. Outside of the college preparatory institutions that emerged specifically to prepare students for college, the public high schools in the nineteenth century—or the “people’s colleges,” as they were called—saw their purpose and function primarily to prepare students for the demands of professional work and life and not for the demands of college.

Public high schools emerged in the nineteenth century as the capstone to the elementary school years and the crowning achievement for students who wanted to go into life and enjoy jobs that promised some stability and prominence. High schools argued that they were the best institutions to prepare students to be responsible, contributing members of America’s emerging middle class.³

By the turn of the twentieth century, however, colleges and universities began to claim that their role was to ensure that a burgeoning middle class retained its professional standing in a nation that was becoming more industrial, urban, and technologically advanced.

They sought to make themselves—not high schools—the capstone to the educational system. To fulfill this mission, colleges and universities needed to offer advanced and rigorous courses that would build on a solid preparatory focus in the lower grades.

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They needed high schools to accept a college preparatory function and send up advanced students to take on the work that colleges wanted to offer. This meant ensuring that a strong college preparatory focus existed in public high schools.

For teachers and administrators in secondary schools, the high school

course was complete in itself and prepared students for the demands of life through the modern subjects of English literature, history, mathematics, sciences, modern languages, and geography. But, the academic subjects were only one part of the mission of high schools. In addition, they sought to help students develop the habits to use their leisure time wisely; to contribute to the nation as responsible, productive citizens; and to acquire strong vocational skills. Colleges, however, wanted secondary schools to deemphasize such a broad focus and instead prepare students for college where they would then finish their education.

High schools lost this battle, and they lost standing in the emerging educational hierarchy. By World War I, they accepted their “secondary” status and their role in preparing students for college. However, since most students in high school still had no intention of

going to college, high schools fulfilled this college preparatory role uneasily. They continued to develop and evolve in ways that differed from the nation’s colleges and universities.⁴

As secondary and higher education grew into the institutions they are today, they fostered distinct teaching styles, expectations, and curricular emphases that reflected their separate histories. We need to recognize that these divisions and differences are deep and long-standing. These differences remain, and they continue to challenge educational reformers, even though the two educational levels are now more closely connected than ever before. Reformers in the nineteenth century understood that these differences existed, and they took specific steps, as I discuss below, to link secondary and higher education and bridge these divisions.

Meaningful Opportunities for Interaction

Accreditation Visits

In the 1870s, as attempts to align the two educational levels and build a college preparatory focus in high schools began, college professors in many states went into high schools, observed classes, met with students and faculty, and delivered public lectures. Those schools that passed muster earned university accreditation, and this accreditation meant that high school graduates could enter universities without needing to pass an entrance examination. One of the reasons for these university visits was to introduce more



students to the possibility of college study at a time when that was not the norm.

Professors were in schools and classrooms where they interacted with students, shared information, and built interest in a college education. By working with administrators and teachers and delivering public lectures, these college professors helped to build public support for higher education.

However, these accreditation visits also were opportunities for high school teachers and college faculty to interact and learn from each other. They provided both educational levels with a stronger, more realistic understanding

of the work each level did and what each expected from the other. This process of visits and accreditation eventually become formalized in the regional accrediting associations that continue to exist (see, for example, the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools and the New England Association of Schools and Colleges).

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Duluth High School, Duluth Minnesota. Source: *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction for the State of Minnesota* (1893).

Professional Organizations

While not all states and regions focused on university visits to high schools, educators throughout the country participated in professional organizations and activities that brought together both educational levels. Some opportunities for this kind of interaction arose through national organizations, such as the National Education Association, or through regional accrediting agencies. Other occasions for interaction existed at the state level as various groups formed around particular issues.

Through these opportunities, educators from both levels were able to discuss crucial issues and reflect on their work. Some of these opportunities were mainly social and were geared more toward discussion and debate than policy analysis and action. But, many meetings and organizations did lead to specific and direct actions that altered the shape of education. Whether these were disciplinary organizations that

brought together history or English faculty, for example, or associations of school administrators, they provided time for representatives from the two educational levels to interact, share ideas, learn from each other, and begin to shape educational policies and practices.

These opportunities to interact solidified connections between secondary and higher education.

The most successful of these organizations and opportunities shared certain characteristics:

- While these organizations did not always follow egalitarian models—colleges often tried to dominate these gatherings—they did provide meaningful opportunities for representatives of secondary and higher education to debate ideas and reforms.
- Once they agreed on a reform or set of reforms, representatives used these opportunities to develop a set of structures or mechanisms for implementing necessary reforms and for holding both levels accountable.
- Even after developing such structures, educators from both levels continued to meet, review prior reforms, and promote new ones.

Perhaps, most importantly, these associations focused on the people who would be directly involved in educational reform. Many organizations existed for school administrators and college presidents, but high school teachers—who would ultimately be implementing the reforms at the ground level—worked closely with their counterparts in higher education through these organizations. High school teachers and college faculty, not just administrators or policy analysts, were instrumental in developing reforms that brought the two levels closer together.

In the absence of a central authority to control America's schools, these professional associations provided crucial

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support in organizing the nation's schools into a system of education. Through these organizations and association meetings, representatives of both secondary and higher education formed a cooperative team. Importantly, they learned that the relationship had to be dynamic and that both levels had to reach out, compromise, and be mutually accommodating.

Cooperative, Dynamic Partnerships

College visits to high schools that developed in the last decades of the nineteenth century led to standards and requirements that better aligned the needs and expectations of both levels. While there were complaints from high

schools that colleges were dominating the process and forcing new standards and expectations, it often was the case that secondary schools exerted their own influence on colleges and universities. Each level affected and shaped the other, and both levels proved to be mutually accommodating.

By going into high schools, college personnel learned a great deal about the secondary schools. As a visible presence in schools, college faculty alerted students to the possibility of advanced study in a nearby university. Similarly, college professors gained a better understanding of how high school teachers taught, what they focused on, what textbooks they used, and what they expected from their students.



Central High School, Kansas City, Missouri. Source: *Forty-Fifth Report of the Public Schools of the State of Missouri* (1895).

Building an educational system that linked secondary and higher education was a dynamic process in which both levels shifted and changed to better fit each other.

This understanding underscored for visitors the differences in teaching styles and expectations between the two educational levels.

As they established a strong connection with secondary schools and worked to reduce these differences, colleges and universities found themselves moving in the direction of secondary schools by embracing degree programs and admission requirements that paralleled many of the modern courses offered in high schools.

High schools lost status and prestige in this relationship as colleges gradually superseded secondary schools at the top of the educational hierarchy. Nonetheless, they recognized that colleges needed high school students, and they used this recognition—along with the power and authority it gave them—to nudge colleges toward a modern curriculum and toward admission requirements that more clearly reflected the work of secondary schools.

By aligning more closely with secondary schools and building on the work of high schools, universities opened their doors to more students and solidified their place at the top of the educational pyramid. But, they did so by adjusting to high schools, not expecting them simply to meet collegiate demands.

Building an educational system that linked secondary and higher education was a dynamic process in which both levels shifted and changed to fit each other; neither dominated the other. While there often were hard feelings and tension, each recognized the valuable ideas of the other and engaged in a process of debate and accommodation. This mutual recognition reduced tension and provided a strong basis for educational reform.

Conclusion

History cannot tell us explicitly what we should do today as we promote P-16 reforms. Contexts shift and change over time, and the twenty-first century is not the nineteenth century. However, history can underscore the complexity of the challenge. It can point us toward the future and highlight potential ways of working through thorny issues and problems. It will not provide specific policies for today's educational context, but it can suggest avenues that might lead to fruitful reforms and research. That is the true power of history: to provide us with a richer context in which to address issues and make sense of complex situations.

In light of this, three historical realities emerge that reformers should keep in mind:

1. Secondary and higher education have different histories, which makes aligning them a challenge. These histories reflect unique traditions, missions, and governance structures. High schools and colleges are distinct institutions that, over time, filled



different purposes, and we need to recognize these differences when crafting educational policies.

2. These historical differences underscore the necessity for secondary and higher education to work together as partners. To address this reality, reformers need to create structures that provide opportunities for meaningful interaction.
3. Throughout history, secondary and higher education mutually influenced and shaped each other. Similarly, the process of reform today needs to be dynamic, wherein both levels accept the responsibility to make changes and revisions.

History also raises important questions for us today. Specifically, how do we foster meaningful interaction and collaboration among secondary and higher education and others involved? How do we maintain open, deliberative discussion while respecting the different histories that mark secondary and higher education? How do we ensure that conflict and tension—which will be part of the process—are channeled into productive policies, as they were in earlier reform efforts? History raises these questions and provides a starting point for answering them.

Notes

¹ Charles W. Eliot, “The Report of the Committee of Ten,” *Educational Review* 7 (February 1894): 109; “Annual Meeting of the Classical and High-School Teachers,” *New England Journal of Education* 5 (April 12, 1877): 175; Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, *Fourth Annual Report of the President and Treasurer* (New York: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1909): 134.

² Bill Gates, “National Education Summit on High Schools,” Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, February 26, 2005. www.gatesfoundation.org/MediaCenter/Speeches; Robert Pear, “Governors of 13 States Plan to Raise Standards in High Schools,” *The New York Times* (February 28, 2005): p. A11; U.S. Department of Education, *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*. Washington, D.C., 2006.

³ See William J. Reese, *The Origins of the American High School*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

⁴ See Marc A. VanOverbeke, *The Standardization of American Schooling: Linking Secondary and Higher Education, 1870-1910*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).





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