

Chapter Two

**P–16 Policy Alignment in the States:
Findings from a 50-State Survey**

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Although the vast majority of high school students aspire to graduate from high school and earn a college degree, most will leave the educational pipeline before attaining a degree. Estimates suggest that about 69% of high school freshmen in the United States graduate from high school within four years (NCHEMS 2006a). Of high school graduates who enroll in college seeking a bachelor’s degree, about 56% earn that degree within six years. Of high school graduates enrolling in college to seek an associate’s degree, about 28% attain that degree within three years (NCHEMS 2007).

High remediation rates for students entering college indicate that many high school graduates are unprepared for college-level academic work. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (Wirt et al. 2004) show that 61% of public two-year college students and 25% of four-year students complete at least one postsecondary-level remedial course. College graduation rates are significantly lower for students who take any remedial course (Wirt et al.).

Low college graduation rates and high remediation rates are indicators of a disjuncture between the K–12 and postsecondary education sectors. Kirst and Venezia (2001) found that students receive unclear signals from high schools, colleges, and state governments about how to prepare for college. For example:

- High school curricula and graduation standards usually do not match college admissions requirements;
- State K–12 and postsecondary budgets are typically separate;
- State data systems typically do not track students after high school graduation; and
- States are not held accountable for student progress and success across the divide from high school to college.

In a 2004 study, Kirst and Venezia continued to explore P–16 alignment by examining “policies, perceptions and practices related to the transition between high school and college” (p. 4) through case studies of six states. In their findings, the authors describe a system in which students aspire to attend college but are often confused by inconsistent signals about how to adequately prepare for college. Kirst and Bracco (2004)

conclude that the lack of clear P–16 policy signals hampers student readiness for and success in postsecondary education.

In *Claiming Common Ground*, the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education extends previous P–16 research by examining P–16 alignment from a state policy perspective (Callan et al. 2006). The authors present evidence demonstrating that standards for college readiness are confusing for students and that state and national reforms have not adequately addressed the need to align K–12 and postsecondary education. The authors identify four policy levers that states can use to improve college readiness:

- **Statewide data systems** involve each state’s ability to track individual students’ progress and course-taking throughout their educational careers and into the workforce.
- **Alignment of coursework and assessments** refers to the extent to which the curricula and tests in K–12 schools and in the first years of college are complementary with and connected to each other.
- **State finance** refers to the budgeting tools (such as cross-sector funding, funding for dual enrollment, and financial incentives for accountability) that states can use to improve P–16 collaboration.
- **Accountability** refers to how states report and hold institutions accountable for student progress and success from preschool through college.

Claiming Common Ground concludes by urging states to focus on these four policy areas to help K–12 and postsecondary education systems work together and improve students’ college readiness and success.

In examining P–16 efforts across the states, this chapter uses as a guiding framework the four state policy levers identified in *Claiming Common Ground*, as well as two additional themes that arose from the research: P–16 governance and public relations. The six thematic findings are based primarily on responses to a 50-state survey on P–16 councils of the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO), which was conducted in 2007 by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education.¹ After presenting findings related to these six thematic areas, this chapter offers additional findings and conclusions based on an analysis across the themes.

FINDING ONE: P–16 GOVERNANCE

State P–16 councils are becoming more prevalent, but a variety of obstacles limit the capacity of these councils to implement P–16 policies.

¹ For methodological information, please refer to “Methodological Notes” at the end of this chapter.

P–16 Governance Councils Provide a Forum for Alignment

As recently as 2001, most states lacked regular opportunities for P–12 and postsecondary policymakers to discuss P–16 alignment issues (Kirst and Venezia 2001). Today, however, most states report having forums that facilitate collaboration among P–12 and postsecondary policymakers. “Diplomas Count,” *Education Week*’s June 2008 publication on P–16 councils reports that 38 states have P–16 councils or governance structures that perform that role, with two states (Louisiana and Pennsylvania) having dual state-level councils or groups.

The structures, goals, participants, and frequency of meetings of P–16 councils vary across states. Many state P–16 councils are convened by the governor and typically, but not always, the state higher education executive officer is a member of the state P–16 council. In 18 states, the scope of the P–16 council addresses educational alignment from preschool to college and beyond (Diplomas Count 2008, p. 16). In addition, 19 councils report that they typically meet quarterly, although some councils meet “as needed” (Diplomas Count 2008).

Barriers to P–16 Governance

According to SHEEO survey responses, the most frequently reported obstacles that limit the capacity of P–16 councils are lack of resources, lack of policymaking ability, and difficulty collaborating across educational sectors.

In terms of resources needed by P–16 councils, the most common responses were money, staff, and the attention of key leaders. For example, when asked about the primary obstacle that the states’ P–16 council faced, one SHEEO reported that “funding has always been an issue,” another cited “resources, both human and financial,” and a third said, “The initiative could pursue its goals more aggressively if it had more resources.” A 2008 report published by the Education Commission of the States (Dounay) also finds that lack of financial and human resources hampers P–16 councils’ ability to accomplish their goals. The report provides examples of strategies that states have used to attempt to overcome these resource limitations.

A lack of policymaking authority at the state, district, and institution levels also poses a barrier to P–16 governance. For example, one SHEEO reported that, in seeking to implement improved policies, the state P–16 commission was limited to improving communication between school districts and universities. Another respondent explained, “The partnership has not been a policymaking body. Its results depended upon the entities to which the co-chairs are allied to embrace and carry the torch for the partnership goals,” including lobbying with the legislature.

In relation to this issue, several SHEEOs reported that the greatest obstacle to implementing P–16 policies in their states is the challenge of working across the P–12 and postsecondary sectors. One SHEEO said, “Working effectively in partnerships is not

a natural act.” Another said, “The purpose of the [P–16 initiative] is to bring people together to build a shared agenda. This is never easy.”

FINDING TWO: DATA SYSTEMS

The Data Quality Campaign (DQC) leads national efforts to develop state P–16 data systems—and states reported progress in developing such systems. However, barriers are limiting the states’ effectiveness, including challenges in creating a common student ID, privacy concerns, lack of funding for data systems, and difficulty in collaborating across educational sectors.

Data Quality Campaign Frames and Supports Creation of P–16 Data Systems

Spurred by the need for greater accountability in public education, many states have had P–12 data systems in place for years. In 2005, the Data Quality Campaign began working to coordinate the development of education data systems among states. The DQC evaluates state longitudinal educational data systems by measuring progress on ten elements they deem critical to creating effective data systems. The ten elements are: a unique statewide student identifier; student-level enrollment; demographic and program participation information; test-record tracking to measure academic growth; information on untested students; a teacher identifier system; student-level transcript information; student-level college readiness scores; student-level graduation and drop-out data; the ability to match student records between P–12 and postsecondary education; and a statewide data audit system.

According to the DQC website, in 2008, Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Louisiana, and Utah lead the nation in progress on data systems. These states reported having all of the DQC’s ten necessary elements for a complete P–16 data system. Forty-six states reported having at least half the necessary elements.

Barriers to Aligning Data Systems

Based on the SHEEO survey, states are using one data system to track individual student performance from preschool through high school and another system to track students in college. Few states combine these data systems to track students from preschool through college. For example, as one SHEEO said, “In the past three years, the [state department of higher education] has been able to obtain unit-specific data from all . . . [public] postsecondary systems and to establish a database by which data from each system can be linked to other systems. This data system does not link to either the P–12 or labor (wage based/unemployment) data systems.” Lack of funding may affect the production of a cross-sector education database. As one SHEEO explained, “The greatest barrier [to creating a comprehensive data system] is a lack of a statewide-funded mandate.”

Another obstacle to the development of a cross-sector data system is states' inability to create a cross-sector unique student identifier that would enable the tracking of individual students from preschool to college. In many states, the P–12 and postsecondary sectors use different identifiers for their students. For example, the state university system may identify students with a university ID number while the P–12 system uses the social security number. As one SHEEO reported, “The largest barrier we face is finding a way to identify students between the P–12 system and the higher education system.” Another SHEEO agreed, saying that the chief obstacle to creating a comprehensive data system is the “inability to track individual student performance across educational sectors.” It is important to note that private educational institutions (both P–12 and postsecondary) and the workforce sectors are typically not included in state data systems.

Concern about student privacy, particularly in relation to the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) is another frequently cited impediment to the creation of P–16 data systems. For example, one SHEEO reported, “The Department of Education has shown reluctance to using social security numbers to identify students.” Another said that “federal privacy regulations and FERPA remain the primary obstacles to successful implementation.” Some states, like Utah, have passed legislation permitting the creation of a common student identifier. The DQC website provides information and resources for states about how to address FERPA and privacy.

FINDING THREE: ALIGNMENT OF COURSEWORK AND ASSESSMENTS

States reported mixed progress in aligning high school coursework with postsecondary expectations. Achieve’s American Diploma Project leads curricular alignment efforts by framing and supporting states’ efforts in this area. States have made the greatest progress in aligning curricula in math and English. In relation to the alignment of assessments, the survey results did not indicate any predominant patterns.

Alignment of Coursework

Two primary themes emerged regarding the alignment of P–12 and postsecondary curricula. First, Achieve’s American Diploma Project (ADP) leads national efforts by framing and supporting the alignment of high school curricular requirements with postsecondary expectations. Through the project, Achieve works with 33 member states to advocate for the alignment of standards, graduation requirements, assessments, data systems, and accountability with the expectations of college and careers (Achieve 2008).

Second, the most frequently mentioned subject areas in which states are working to develop curricular alignment are math and English. More than half of SHEEOs surveyed indicated that their states receive support for creating math and English standards through their participation in the American Diploma Project. Survey

respondents frequently mentioned statewide progress in aligning curricula and standards in math and English.

Barriers to Aligning Coursework

In their survey responses, SHEEOs indicated that the process of collaborating between P–12 and postsecondary education poses the greatest challenge to aligning P–12 and postsecondary curricula. For example, one SHEEO said, “Spanning cultures between P–12 and higher education is always a challenge.” Another said, “Cross-sector alignment work is time-consuming and complicated and often outside individuals’ specific job assignments.”

Alignment of Assessments

States can use high school assessments to shape P–16 alignment in at least two ways. First, states can use high school achievement tests to predict students’ level of postsecondary preparedness for college and the workforce. Fewer than one-fifth of SHEEOs indicated that their states align statewide high school achievement tests with college or workforce postsecondary expectations. Second, states can use high school assessments to inform postsecondary admissions and placement. The survey asked SHEEOs if their states align high school assessments with postsecondary admissions and placement policies. Fewer than five SHEEOs indicated definitively that their states use high school achievement tests for these purposes.²

FINDING FOUR: FINANCE

Of the four key policy levers that states can use to improve P–16 policy, state finance was the least frequently mentioned in the SHEEO survey responses.

Claiming Common Ground (Callan et al. 2006) calls on states to “develop financial incentives to support and stimulate K–12 and postsecondary education to collaborate to improve college readiness and success” (p. 11). The report also finds that the separate legislative structures governing K–12 and postsecondary finance (for example, the committee processes) inhibit cross-sector collaboration in this area. The surveys did not ask specifically about state financial incentives, and, when asked to describe the nature of the P–16 initiatives’ work, most survey respondents did not describe financial policy levers as integral to stimulating their states’ P–16 efforts. Seven SHEEOs mentioned that their states use postsecondary financial aid to encourage college attendance. Three SHEEOs said their states provide funding for dual enrollment. Two mentioned that their states provide funding for students to take college placement exams.

² However, the survey responses were unclear for this question.

With the exception of funding challenges related to P–16 governance structures mentioned earlier, SHEEOs did not refer to barriers directly related to the state finance process.

Financial Aid

When asked about their P–16 policies and initiatives, fewer than ten states identified financial aid as an integral part of this effort. Two SHEEOs said that their states’ P–16 strategies include efforts to increase the availability of financial aid for college students generally. Other SHEEOs reported financial incentives targeted at specific groups. For example, one SHEEO said that the state is interested in increasing the availability of financial aid particularly for first-generation college-goers. Another SHEEO identified a grant-funded project designed for state residents age 25 or older.

Funding for Dual Enrollment

About one-fifth of states surveyed mentioned the funding of dual enrollment programs in which high school students enroll in college classes. For example, one SHEEO said, “For the 2008 [academic year], the [state] has initiated the dual enrollment program, [which] will pay the student costs for public high school students to enroll in courses for both high school and college credit.” Another state is implementing dual enrollment via state-funded distance learning courses: “The governor has initiated a program for the community colleges and universities to offer online courses to be funded through the Department of Postsecondary Education.” Other SHEEOs reported that their states recognize the need for dual enrollment and are moving toward implementing statewide dual enrollment policies. For example, one SHEEO said, “We need to work together to expand dual/concurrent enrollment programs and provide appropriate college credit for dual enrollment programs that transfer to a degree program.”

Funding for High School Assessment Exams

Another financial policy lever mentioned by a handful of survey respondents is state funding for high school assessments. A small number of states pay for high school students to take ACT, SAT or other assessment exams. In one or two states, the ACT is mandatory for all high school students. According to one SHEEO, “Funding has been provided to encourage high schools to offer college placement exams (for example, Compass) for high school juniors to assess their readiness.” Another said, “The 2006 General Assembly passed legislation mandating the administration of the ACT to all juniors and the early diagnostic ACT/EPAS (Explore and Plan) assessments to all 8th and 10th graders in public schools, paid by the state.”

FINDING FIVE: ACCOUNTABILITY

The states' primary focus for accountability appears to be on the P–12 sector. The most frequently cited accountability reporting at the postsecondary level is the high school feedback report.

Claiming Common Ground calls for states to publicly report on student progress and be held accountable for the improvement of student performance from high school through college completion. Without clearly defined achievement targets and public reporting of student progress it is impossible to tell how well state educational systems are ushering students through the educational pipeline.

Primary Accountability Focus Is on P–12 Schools

About half of the SHEEOS reported that their states have performance standards for high school academic progress. Eight SHEEOs indicated that their P–16 councils have the goal of implementing cross-sector accountability standards. However, only two of the 45 SHEEOs surveyed reported that their states have a clearly articulated P–16 accountability policy. One exception to the generally weak postsecondary accountability reporting is Georgia. The Georgia SHEEO reported that the state, “developed P–16 ‘data marts’ to monitor student progress from high school to college and into the workforce. Accountability measures have been set for high school graduation, college transition, and college success. The P–16 Department uses a Balanced Scorecard to strategically manage and communicate progress towards its goals.”

High School Feedback Reports

According to SHEEOs, the high school feedback report is a common performance reporting requirement. High school feedback reports are generated by colleges to inform high schools about their students' college readiness by describing their graduates' performance in college (typically their first-year performance). Seven SHEEOs indicated that their state higher education institutions provide such reports to high schools. A few of these states said they publish high school feedback reports for all schools. Others indicated that their postsecondary institutions provide feedback reports regarding “entering first-year students from specific high schools.”

FINDING SIX: PUBLIC RELATIONS

States are investing in marketing campaigns to promote the benefits of college and early college preparation.

Six SHEEOs mentioned the importance of marketing in their P–16 efforts. Of these, three reported that they are using public relations to convey the importance of education—and public education in particular—for state residents. For example, one SHEEO explained that his state’s P–16 initiative includes “an extensive public relations and marketing component.” Another SHEEO reported that the P–16 council is “educating the public about the importance of identifying and correcting weaknesses in the education system.”

Three SHEEOs reported that their states created marketing campaigns to convey to residents the importance of postsecondary education in particular. According to one SHEEO, for example, her state is “developing strategies for increasing postsecondary participation rates. [Strategies include] providing more information to students at all levels detailing the advantages of postsecondary work.” Another SHEEO described state efforts to raise “expectations leading to enrollment in colleges and universities.” A third reported “an enhanced focus on educational outreach,” including focusing on increasing participation of high school graduates in postsecondary education.

CROSS-THEMATIC FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Several overall conclusions can be drawn from the responses of state higher education executive officers across the themes identified above.

Gap Between Planning and Implementation of P–16 Policy

In most states, there appears to be a substantial gap between the planning and implementation of P–16 policy. While many SHEEOs described their states’ P–16 plans and goals, few reported on legislated P–16 policies. For example, 46 states have well-established student-level tracking systems that are designed for use in accountability reporting, but few state legislatures have designated use of the data system for accountability reporting. The gap between planning and implementation may be affected by the lack of policymaking authority of P–16 councils. Other factors that appear to affect states’ ability to move beyond plans and into implementation include: the challenge of bridging the cultural divide of P–12 and postsecondary education; the long history of divided state education governance structures (as described in chapter one); and the policy context in each state, including the ability of the education sector to influence state policy.

In light of this finding, states should begin to clearly distinguish between P–16 plans and policies, so that achieving agreement across the educational sectors about goals no longer remains confused with success in implementing P–16 policies. In addition, states would benefit from research that closely examines cross-sector collaborations in terms of the challenges and successes of moving beyond goal-setting to the implementation of policy.

National Efforts Can Foster P–20 Alignment in the States

A second conclusion of this analysis is that national organizations like Achieve and the Data Quality Campaign (DQC) appear to provide valuable frameworks which can serve as a catalyst within states for progress in specific alignment areas. For example, SHEEOs reported the greatest curricular alignment in math and English, the two areas most supported by Achieve’s American Diploma Project. Based on SHEEO responses, participation in Achieve appears to help states move forward with P–16 initiatives in at least two ways. First, these organizations provide a process that states can follow for aligning curricula, exams, and data systems. Second, participation in Achieve and DQC provides a common language that may help states bridge the cultural divide between P–12 and postsecondary education.

It is important to note, however, that, at least for curricular alignment, the standards provided by national organizations may not align with the expectations of postsecondary institutions within the state. For example, state math and English curricula may align with Achieve’s standards while not aligning with the state’s postsecondary institutions’ math and English curricula.³ Additional research is needed to address the ways these organizations shape P–16 efforts.

State Finance Is Underutilized as a Policy Lever

Another conclusion that can be drawn from this analysis is that state finance is underutilized as a P–16 policy lever. Very few of the surveyed SHEEOs articulated the ways that their states use financial incentives to promote P–16 alignment. Survey responses indicate that postsecondary financial aid, funding for dual enrollment, and assessment exams are used by fewer than half of the states. No states identified cross-sector budgeting to improve P–16 alignment or financial incentives to improve student persistence, course completion, or achievement. Further research is needed to better understand the extent to which financial mechanisms and incentives can be used to help align state P–12 and postsecondary education.

State Governance and Policy Context Affect the Use of Policy Levers

Finally, it appears that each state’s ability to use its policy levers is affected by its education governance structures and its policy context. In some high-control states, education policy tends to be more structured and manipulated at the state level—such as through a single statewide governing board or by legislative action. In low-control states, on the other hand, education policymaking is less concentrated in legislative authority and is sometimes fiercely regional or institutional in nature. Although the SHEEO

³ In addition, there is a self-selection issue regarding progress in curricular alignment, associated with states participating in ADP and DQC, since states most likely to participate in these efforts are those most likely to be most focused on P–16 alignment.

surveys are not conclusive in this regard, it appears that the amount of control a state has over its education policymaking may be an important factor to consider when assessing the state's ability to implement P-16 policy changes. Additional research may shed light on the role of the state policy context on P-16 policy implementation.

METHODOLOGICAL NOTES

Forty-four states completed the survey on P-16 councils of the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO). Those not completing the survey were Florida, Maine, Connecticut, Iowa, Massachusetts, and New York. Heather Jack, policy consultant for the National Center, administered the survey and completed initial sorting and summary of the SHEEO responses. This chapter is based on Jack's summarized accounts of survey responses. Joni Finney and Michael Kirst assisted with data analysis and provided feedback on drafts. The Education Commission of the States (ECS) also conducted a survey of state P-16 councils, with results presented in "Diplomas Count" (2008), in Dounay (2008), and on the ECS website.

Survey questions were open-ended and asked a variety of questions in the following areas: the nature of state P-16 initiatives, the extent of alignment between P-12 and postsecondary curricula and assessments, and barriers to progress on state P-16 agendas. Some SHEEOs provided supplementary information from legislative and planning documents.

Content analysis of responses was used to examine the extent to which states are implementing P-16 policies. Content analysis is a research method described by Merriam (1998) as "the process of simultaneously coding raw data and constructing categories to capture relevant characteristics of the document's content" (p. 160). The first step in analyzing the survey data was to sort the responses into theoretical categories. Maxwell (2005) describes the process of creating theoretical categories as "placing the coded data into a more general or abstract framework" (p. 97). Using HyperResearch qualitative analysis software, relevant portions of the survey results were sorted into the following four categories: data systems; alignment (standards, coursework and assessments); finance; and accountability. Content analysis is an inductive process, so additional categories were allowed to emerge from the data. Survey responses that did not apply to the four categories were initially categorized as "other." Analysis of the survey results in the "other" category revealed two additional themes: P-16 governance and public relations.

Survey responses within each of the six categories were examined to determine if common themes existed. Using HyperResearch, content reports were generated that listed all relevant survey responses sorted by theoretical category. The content reports were examined and common themes that emerged from the survey responses were identified.

A limitation of this analysis is that the survey responses were open-ended and therefore not conducive to statistical analysis. However, the open-ended survey responses were useful for content analysis, allowing for the discovery of broad themes and trends across responses. In addition, the survey was administered two years ago; the survey responses reflect the status of P-16 policies at the time the data were collected. Supplementary data from recent national reports were used to help overcome this limitation. Another potential limitation is that the surveys were completed exclusively by SHEEOs, who may have different perceptions or knowledge of progress on various P-16 indicators than others involved with P-16 efforts.