Rethinking the Structure of High Schools in South Texas: An Early College Collaboration

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The evolution of education in America—specifically the evolution of its public high schools—has been an ongoing process, a process that many individuals feel has not stayed current with the demands of our global world. Bill Gates, for instance, thinks our high schools are obsolete. He told participants of the 2005 National Governors Association that even when high schools were working the way they were designed, they did not teach today’s young adults what they need to know to live in tomorrow’s world. “Training the workforce of tomorrow within the high schools of today is like trying to teach kids about today’s computers on a 50-year-old mainframe. It’s the wrong tool for the times” (Gates 2005).

Many would agree with Gates. Our country has yet to recognize that we no longer live in an agrarian society, that the majority of our students in public education are no longer Anglo, that English is not the home language for many students, and that a high school diploma is no longer sufficient to obtain a job that will support a family. And yet our educators and politicians are reluctant to change the paradigm.

Our Ailing Public High School System

Those of us within higher education recognize the shortcomings of today’s high school diploma. Many students finish their junior year with all their high school requirements fulfilled, goof off during their senior year so that they can graduate with their class, and then come to the university needing remedial work. Other students never obtain sufficient reading, writing, or mathematical proficiency to succeed in college. Both groups have forced colleges and universities to create developmental classes—which essentially amounts to expensive duplication of high school instruction with no college credit.

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Many students drop out of high school. The nationwide rate for black high school dropouts is twice that of whites, and the number of Hispanics dropping out is even greater. The numbers themselves are astounding. During the 2003–2004 school year, 42,979 of students in Texas did not finish the twelfth grade. For those states reporting nationwide, the total was 545,266 (Texas Education Agency 2005). Statistics show that only 40 percent of high school dropouts have jobs. What’s more, they are nearly four times more likely to be arrested than their friends who stayed in high school. In addition, high school dropouts are far more likely to give birth to children in their teens, and one in four will turn to welfare or other kinds of government assistance (Bridgeland, DiIulio Jr., and Morison 2006).

The makeup of students in America’s high schools has changed. The western states have the largest influx of new populations—including those from Mexico and Central American countries, as well as those resulting from increasing emigration from the Orient. (We may need to erect a new Statue of Liberty, a sister for our western shores.) Today over 40 percent of the young people in our public schools are not white. The largest growth has been the Hispanic population, but other groups—including African American and Asian/Pacific Islanders—are also increasing. The white population continues to decline; in 1972, 78 percent of public school attendees were white; in 2005, that number had dropped to 58 percent. The populations increasing most rapidly are also the populations attending some of our high-poverty schools. Forty-nine percent of Hispanics, 48 percent of African Americans, and 36 percent of Native Americans are in schools with the highest measure of poverty (U.S. Department of Education 2007).

High school curriculum is trailing as well; students are not receiving the international knowledge and skills necessary to access the good jobs of the future. Today only 50 percent of American high school students study a language, and for 70 percent of them it is one year of introductory Spanish. Critical languages—Arabic, Korean, Farsi, and Mandarin Chinese—are for the most part unavailable. In the countries that speak those languages, however, students learn English along with their own language. A recent Rand Corporation survey of sixteen global corporations found that when they compared universities around the world, U.S. students were seen to be “strong technically” but “shortchanged” in cross-cultural experience and “linguistically deprived” (Stewart 2007).
Public Education’s Challenge

Our challenge is to redesign America’s high schools to make sure our students gain the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in this global age. That means a rigorous curriculum designed to give students—all students—the scientific and technological literacy necessary for tomorrow’s economy. It must also provide them with the cross-cultural leadership skills they will need to exist in a demographically diverse environment. Most importantly, students must learn how to adapt to rapid change.

Texas has been an active participant in many initiatives seeking to improve high schools, including the American Diploma Project Network. It was the first state to adopt a college-ready curriculum as its default curriculum for all students. The state also revised its state assessments to more carefully match the knowledge and skills students should have in high school and on through graduation. Texas has moved exit-level assessment from tenth grade to eleventh grade to more accurately assess student achievement in high school. In 2003, the state, led by Governor Rick Perry and other elected officials, invested in the Texas High School Project (THSP)—a public-private partnership. The goals of the THSP were to boost graduation rates and to increase the number of high school students prepared for postsecondary success. Dedicated funds from the state in the amount of $148 million in appropriated and federal funding, combined with the contributions of several philanthropic partners, including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation, the Wallace Foundation, National Instruments, and the Communities Foundation of Texas, resulted in a $260 million collaboration dedicated to improving Texas high schools.

Creating an Early College High School

One outcome of this alliance is the University Preparatory High School, a collaboration between Texas A&M University–Corpus Christi (TAMUCC) and Flour Bluff Independent School District (ISD). In 2004, the Gates Foundation, through the THSP, approached us to see if we would consider establishing an early college high school. Knowing the challenges many of our high schools faced and recognizing the need for a new high-school model, we accepted. A $400,000 grant ($100,000 per year for four years) from the Gates and Dell foundations was used for planning and the initial establishment of the school. Criteria required that the school be autonomous; that it remain small, with no more than one hundred students per grade level; and that student selection give priority to first-generation college attendees, representatives of underrepresented peoples,
English language learners, and members of low socioeconomic families. These students are in abundance in South Texas, and they need assistance entering higher education.

Conceptually, an early college high school blends high school and college into a coherent educational program designed so that all students can complete up to two years of college while still in high school and working toward a high school diploma. Skills for preparing students for college course work begin in the middle schools, with emphasis placed on reading, writing, mathematics, science, and computer literacy. This seamless transition from K–12 education to the university allows students to begin their college work when their performance shows that they are ready.

When we accepted the challenge to create an early college high school, we were one of thirteen doing so in Texas. There are now plans to increase that number to thirty in the coming year. Each of the current thirteen is unique. Several are partnerships between community colleges and independent school districts. Some are located in urban areas; others in rural settings. Some, like Collegiate High School—another early college partnership in our community between Del Mar Community College and Corpus Christi ISD—place high school freshmen in core college courses immediately. These schools hope to award sixty-hour associate degrees, along with high school diplomas when students graduate. Others, like University Prep, delay the full-time integration of students on the university campus, focusing first on college-readiness skills at the high school. At the university, less emphasis is placed on an associate’s degree, with more emphasis placed on doing well in core classes.

The Fundamentals of University Preparatory High School

Instead of reading, ‘riting, and ‘rithmetic, University Prep has adopted Bill Gates’s new three R’s as the basic building blocks of better high schools: relevant course work; rigorous course work; and meaningful relationships between teachers, administrators, and university professors and students and parents. During the first two years, the high school teachers focus on college preparation. Courses are blocked, assigned readings are intensified, and writing is required in all classes. In addition, everyone takes computer, math, and science courses.

Ninth graders are acclimated to the university campus by regular visits to hear speakers, attend sporting events, and enjoy theater and musical performances. All of their course work is preparatory high school work; no university classes are taken by high school freshmen.
Tenth graders also visit the university campus on a regular basis. In addition, they participate in university core course work (three classes each semester), which is taught at University Prep by university professors. At the eleventh and twelfth grade level, students attend classes at the university almost full time and take core courses along with other undergraduates. A primary difference between University Prep students and university undergraduates is the staff support they receive simultaneously at the high school.

University Prep is a school where everyone believes that obtaining a college education is possible. From the moment students begin as freshmen, the goal they are given is to obtain a college degree. They are not selected for the school because they have the highest grades, because they are gifted, or because they can afford a special preparatory school experience; they are selected because they want to succeed—and now success means a college degree.

Benefits and Outcomes

The benefits to University Preparatory High School students—and their parents—are immense. For most, a college education was not previously part of their dream—too expensive to consider and too far from their frame of reference to attempt. Now, students like Lisa, a beautician’s daughter, has the opportunity to have the first two years of college paid for and completed before she graduates from high school. Bright, Hispanic, and the child of a single parent, Lisa cannot wait to get to school each day.

Raul, also Hispanic, worried that he would miss playing sports. At University Prep, he is allowed to select only two extracurricular activities. Now a sophomore, Raul likes being on the baseball team, but has not had time to miss football, basketball, and soccer.

The university and the school district also benefit from this collaboration. Flour Bluff ISD continues to receive payment from the state for each child attending school. The district then uses a portion of those funds to pay the university tuition for each child at University Prep. TAMUCC does not, however, require University Prep students to pay designated tuition, only board-authorized tuition. Special fees are also adjusted on a “when needed” basis so that freshmen pay no extra fees, and sophomores pay only for library privileges and identification cards. Once they are enrolled in university classes, University Prep students are included in the undergraduate count at TAMUCC. The credit hours they generate each semester increases the formula funding the university receives. In
addition, once the school is fully operational, the university will be assured of one hundred new students every year—all members of the underrepresented groups TAMUCC is charged to serve. Gates Foundation funding did what it was intended to do—it got us up and running. Now, however, working together, the ISD and the university are making it possible for University Preparatory High School to continue without outside funding.

Less visible but more long-lasting benefits of University Preparatory High School include the research opportunities afforded TAMUCC faculty and students. A senior faculty member has already launched a longitudinal study of students attending the school. She and her doctoral students hope to have qualitative data regarding the long-term experiences and opinions of these early college attendees. Although it is early, hopes are high that a large majority of the students attending University Prep will go on to college—and will graduate.

Although University Preparatory is only in its second year, we are already seeing some noteworthy results: 99 percent of students passed the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) reading test at the end of their freshman year; 30 percent of students achieved “commended performance” on the TAKS reading test; and 74 percent of students passed the TAKS mathematics test, in a year where the statewide passing average was 60 percent (J. Crenshaw, pers. comm.).

Already visible is the emergence of a college-bound culture. Students are more willing to do outside reading and homework. They are aware of their own deficiencies and are working to eliminate them. The focus for everyone in the school is the common goal of college readiness.

Also apparent is the benefit of a small school environment. With a maximum of one hundred students per level, relationships are strong. Every teacher is familiar with every student. Parents are more involved and keep in contact with the school. When students took the Texas Higher Education Assessment (THEA) for the first time, parents called immediately to see how they could help their children raise their scores. This is the state test University Prep students will need to pass before they will be admitted to a university. Another heartening factor is the retention of students in the program. During the first year, only four students left University Prep—two because their families moved out of the district, and two because they wished to return to a regular high school environment. Most noteworthy, in the first year of operation, only five disciplinary referrals were made. The collaboration between teachers, administration, and parents is strong, and it is affecting the students—both their performance and their behavior.
Although it is early, every indication points to University Preparatory High School’s success. It eliminates the lost senior year, encourages an early commitment to attend college, offers a close environment with personalized instruction, emphasizes academics rather than activities, eases the adjustment to a college campus, provides up to sixty hours of college course work for minimal cost, and gives students a two-year head start toward obtaining a college degree. University Prep’s establishment has not been easy, and there have been numerous roadblocks. In spite of the pitfalls, the passion and belief of those involved in this innovative high school design are energizing others to take a look at new curriculum, new structures, and new ways of educating the citizens of tomorrow.

**Conclusion**

In closing, I want to share an observation Calvin of the *Calvin & Hobbes* comic strip makes regarding education. Entering his classroom, he says,

"Today for Show and Tell I’ve brought a tiny marvel of nature: a single snowflake. I think we might all learn a lesson from how this utterly unique and exquisite crystal . . . turns into an ordinary, boring molecule of water just like every other one, when you bring it into the classroom."

Taking Calvin’s words to heart, University Preparatory High School is a new design for secondary education—one that recognizes every child as utterly unique.

**References**


