Strengthening the Education Continuum to Increase

COLLEGE READINESS

By Jolanda Westerhof

t the heart of America's greatness has been its commitment to strong public education. Today, America confronts a national crisis that AASCU institutions cannot ignore: Too many students are coming to college unprepared, and the problem is worsening. In a world where talent and innovation will drive national, state and local competitiveness, this is a threat to the very future of our nation.

Measures of educational achievement in the United States show the country on a downward trajectory, especially when compared with achievement levels in other developed and developing countries; our institutions are devoting too many resources to remedial education, and despite this, graduation rates are far below what the country needs, even when measured after six years rather than the traditional four; and too many students are leaving our institutions without degrees but with significant debt.

Over the past 18 months, an AASCU Task Force on College Readiness—cochaired by James Votruba, president emeritus, Northern Kentucky University, and Tomás Morales, president, California State University, San Bernardino (former president, CUNY Staten Island) and

comprised of 12 presidents and chancellors from across the nation—has examined the urgent college readiness challenge. Its report (to be published in October), *Serving America's Future: Increasing College Readiness*, advocates a comprehensive approach to college readiness that includes steps AASCU institutions can take to address this crisis.

College readiness is often defined exclusively in academic terms. For example, the ACT defines college and career readiness as "the acquisition of the knowledge and skills a student needs to enroll and succeed in credit-bearing first-year courses at a postsecondary institution . . . without the need for remediation." Although this is an important aspect of college readiness, the AASCU Task Force determined that this definition is incomplete; its report recommends a broader definition that recognizes both non-cognitive and cognitive preparation.

A review of David Conley's work² led the Task Force to define college readiness as "the circumstance in which a student enters college without having to take any

remedial coursework *and* with 'the mindset and disposition' necessary to succeed in college *and* a supportive personal and social environment to help make this happen."

Thus, this report presumes that college readiness involves at least the following:

- Academic Readiness: The individual has the knowledge and skills to handle, without remediation, the content and requirements of firstyear college classes.
- Personal Readiness: The individual has the "mindset and disposition" to obtain a college education.
- Social Support: The individual has familial support or other sources of social support to succeed in college.



The report goes on to explain why, if progress is to be made, it will come through initiatives that strengthen the entire education continuum—from early childhood through high school and beyond. AASCU institutions must be full partners in this effort to strengthen the education continuum. After all, we are caught up in a web of mutual interdependence with P-12 educators—their outputs are our inputs. Our outputs are their inputs. And for our democracy to flourish and our economy to be globally competitive, every part of our educational system must be successful.

Many AASCU institutions across the nation are partnering with P-12 education in a broad array of exciting new initiatives that are having a significant impact on student academic performance. We conducted a survey of AASCU institutions and the report includes an appendix that describes a variety of college readiness initiatives that are already underway at AASCU institutions. These initiatives provide the ideas and models for institutions committed to developing comprehensive and sustained institutional strategies that are embedded in the campus at every level. Impact cannot be achieved through peripheral or episodic approaches. Strategies must transcend college and departmental boundaries and receive leadership from the highest institutional levels.

Research has shown that students living in areas of concentrated poverty—regardless of race or ethnicity—are, from an educational standpoint, significantly disadvantaged. As a result, the Task Force urges AASCU institutions to place special emphasis on college readiness efforts that target the 8 million children now living in areas of concentrated poverty. Clearly, there is much for us to do.

Working with community partners to implement specific college readiness programs should be a priority for all AASCU institutions. In addition, four specific initiatives should be on all of our campuses: strong teacher

preparation programs; alignment between the P-12 and postsecondary curriculums; provision of timely and useful feedback to the high schools regarding the performance of their graduates; and availability of dual credit classes.

If AASCU institutions are to make an institution-wide commitment to this challenge, it requires the active and engaged leadership of presidents and provosts. Others must be part of the leadership equation, but presidents and provosts must—in both fact and perception—be the ones who make this a campus priority. There are some things that cannot be delegated, and this is one of them.

No other association is better positioned to address the college readiness challenge than AASCU, which is already partnering with the State **Higher Education Executive Officers** (SHEEO) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) on a college readiness project. AASCU institutions have a long and proud tradition of partnering with P-12 education in such areas as teacher education, research on teaching and learning, and curriculum content and design. AASCU institutions also embrace a commitment to public engagement, what we call the "stewardship of place." This commitment involves focusing our energy not only on the progress of our students, but also on the progress of our communities through applied research, technical assistance, demonstration projects, outcomes assessment, policy analysis and other knowledge-based initiatives. In short, we are ideally positioned to address the college readiness crisis in collaboration with our P-12 education partners.

AASCU institutions already have a myriad of responsibilities to serve our current students. Budgets are tight, state support has been declining, faculty workloads are heavy, and current students are often working many hours each week to limit the debt load they will have upon



graduation. Given these circumstances, is it reasonable for AASCU institutions to direct some of their limited resources to helping ensure that future students are college ready? Is it reasonable to expect the faculty and our current students to commit to helping the next generation of college students? The answer is a resounding "yes." Not only is it reasonable for our institutions, faculty and current students to be deeply involved in partnerships that promote college readiness, it is critically important for the welfare of our country, our institutions and our future students.

The time has come for all AASCU institutions to be involved in sustainable college readiness initiatives rooted in what research indicates are critical P-12 intervention points. We must reach across the various grade and age levels and across the different dimensions of "readiness." We must work in partnership with our local P-12 school districts and other community agencies to systematically support and raise the academic achievement and college readiness of the P-12 students. Not only will the students, their families and communities benefit, but so too will our institutions, our states and the country as a whole. P

Notes

¹ACT. (2011). About the Condition of College & Career Readiness. Retrieved from http:// www.act.org/research/policymakers/cccr11/pdf/ ConditionofCollegeandCareerReadiness2011.pdf ²Conley, D. T. (2007). Redefining College Readiness (Vol. 3). Eugene, OR: Educational Policy Improvement Center. Retrieved from https:// www.epiconline.org/files/pdf/RedefiningCR_Vol3. pdf

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