"College Begins in Kindergarten"
Work in Progress—The PreKindergarten-16 Community Collaborative

By Anamarie Garcia & George Barker

Introduction

During the last two decades, reform efforts have acknowledged and attempted to respond to the barriers that prevent all students, and particularly low-income and minority students from experiencing success in schools. Rhetoric and peripheral efforts of reform are abundant in discussions of what needs to be done to improve student achievement (Sarason, 1990). New mission statements, goals, and visions include the wish to educate **all** of our children. Fundamental, long term, systemic changes however, are not clearly evident in these reform efforts. When changes do take place, often they are in the form of additional programs that merely supplement the "status quo."

Anamarie Garcia is an assistant professor in the Department of Theatre and George Barker is an associate professor in the Department of Elementary Education, both at California State University, Northridge, Northridge, California.

Historically, Universities have been involved with the public schools, engaged in shaping K-12 education through the preparation of teachers for elementary and secondary schools, as well as making decisions on which students would be allowed to enter institutions of higher learning. Decisions about curriculum however—what should be taught, to what students, when, and how competency will be measured—have for the most part been left to the discretion of the local public schools and state departments of education (Haycock, 1994). Although universities

have traditionally had some role in the public school system, it is the perception of many that institutions of higher learning have been "spectators" more than "players" in the educational process of **all** students.

It is widely agreed that for true "system change" to occur, those who desire broad-scale improvements in student achievement must engage in a **collective** process of changing whole systems and the cultures within them. Change efforts for the elementary and secondary schools in isolation or higher education alone will not be successful. Substantive reform in one area of schooling can not take place without the concerted efforts of all areas of schooling, simply because of the nature of their interdependence. The active involvement of universities is key to the success of reform efforts. Clearly, academia, traditionally engaged in disciplinary research, has not fostered practices that make public school collaboration easy or available (Populi, 1992).

California State University, Northridge (CSUN) has become integrally involved with such an effort. In 1993, discussions began between administrators of the campus, The Achievement Council of Los Angeles (a non-profit organization to be more comprehensively described later in this paper), and the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). All participants agreed, and it was clearly identified that collaboration was at the center of any successful attempt to improve student achievement K-16. Through the support, expertise, and guidance of The Achievement Council of Los Angeles, the creation of a local collaborative partnership was initiated and subsequently achieved.

This paper will attempt to introduce the participants and give the reader an update of the progress that has been made since the inception of this partnership. We will describe our accomplishments and the activities in which we have been engaged and candidly share the challenges and difficulties we have encountered in our struggle. It is our hope that other university/school partnerships can learn from our "work in progress" and that our sharing might assist others as they build and come together to collaborate within their own K-16 communities to improve the achievement for all students.

Partners of the PreK-16 Community Collaborative

The Los Angeles Achievement Council

The Achievement Council's mission and local educational reform effort originated with the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE). At the national level, the AAHE is dedicated to the cause of improving the quality of American higher education. The AAHE's Education Trust, perhaps, has been the major driving force nationwide in examining and creating reform efforts centered around K-16 education. The Education Trust has been created to establish a vehicle to pull together various K-16 reforms into a more comprehensive and powerful thrust for a successful, seamless education for all children. The work of the Education Trust in K-16 reform has been

well documented (Edgerton, 1994). The Education Trust works toward simultaneous reform of the educational system on all levels, from kindergarten through postsecondary. It aims to strengthen the connections between K-12 and higher education and is particularly dedicated to increasing significantly the number of under-represented and economically disadvantaged students in the nation's urban communities who enter and successfully complete four years of higher education. These goals are being achieved through several initiatives. Two of the initiatives, "Community Compacts for Student Success" and the "K-16 Initiative" concern the PreK-16 Community Collaborative directly. Thus, the Education Trust, under the umbrella of the AAHE is facilitating reform at the national level.

At the state level, the Achievement Council began in 1984 an effort to improve California's educational system and especially the achievement of under-represented and economically disadvantaged students so that all students would have the choice to attend a four-year college or university. The council provides a support system that helps schools and districts build capacity to bring about fundamental change. The Council works with parents, communities, school districts, higher education institutions, and community organizations as a catalyst for major educational reform. The Institute on Urban School Change, a conference sponsored by the Achievement Council in August of 1994, was an opportunity for a local connection to be made between a major university and LAUSD. After further negotiation, a partnership between CSUN and the Grant/Van Nuys Cluster of LAUSD emerged and the collaborative was born.

California State University, Northridge

California State University (CSU), Northridge is located in the San Fernando Valley, in the midst of the Grant/Van Nuys Cluster community, and serves approximately 25,000 students, of which over 50 percent are identified as minority. Served by 1250 faculty, it is one of the largest of the 21 campuses of the CSU system. Twenty five miles northwest of Los Angeles, the San Fernando Valley is a multiethnic community of over one and a half million people.

CSUN is in a prime position to assume a leadership role in educational reform based on systemic change. Currently, General Education is being challenged and restructured in an effort to strive for an exceptional academic education that will translate readily to the professional lives of our graduated students. Departments are in dialogue about issues concerning remedial college courses, student demographics, and more efficient, effective, university-wide academic advising, career advisement, assessment, and mentoring. In place are the Instructional Development workshops, a campus-wide initiative to improve the teaching process. In addition, university leadership has identified the importance of community relations and strongly supports and encourages academic projects directly tied to community. These individual efforts provide a strong foundation for systemic change and implementation of the preK-16 educational reform initiative. There are at this

writing six K-16 partnerships across the nation; CSUN will rightfully be considered a leader in educational reform.

The Los Angeles Unified School District Grant/Van Nuys Cluster

The Grant/Van Nuys Cluster is one **cluster** of the LAUSD. Ranking as the second largest district in the nation, LAUSD totals 640,000 students. The Grant/ Van Nuys Cluster serves 25,676 students, with approximately 5,000 attending high school, 5,000 in middle school, and 15,000 in elementary school. The cluster consists of two high schools, two continuation high schools, four middle schools, 15 elementary schools, one children's center, one special education school, and one adult school. The cluster identifies its student population as 57 percent Latino, 26 percent White, 8 percent Asian, 6 percent African-American, with the remaining 2.5 percent Filipino, Pacific Islander, Native-American, and Alaskan.

Progress to Date

Establishment of Vehicles to Facilitate Systemic Reform

In an attempt to create a structure for the PreK-16 Community Collaborative, each partner identified a group of people within its organization to spearhead the project. At CSUN the university president appointed the dean of the School of Education and the dean of the School of the Arts to serve as the administrative leaders of the PreK-16 effort. These leaders invited 18 university professors from various disciplines to become committed "change agents" at the university. Two professors from among the 18 were selected to serve as co-coordinators for the newly formed Committee on Change. It is the charge of the co-coordinators to lead the group in identifying goals and creating and implementing an action plan. The co-coordinators also serve as a liaison between the university and the K-12 cluster.

LAUSD had very recently de-centralized and created 27 clusters. A district mandate established a body within each cluster to handle cluster instruction. The body was named the Instructional Cabinet and was to be comprised of stake holders within the K-12 cluster. The role of the Instructional Cabinet is to support the cluster leader in implementing instructional practices throughout the cluster. It is also utilized by the Grant/Van Nuys Cluster as a vehicle for the efforts of the PreK-16 Community Collaborative.

At this point, the PreK-16 Roundtable was established with representatives from the anchor organizations, the Achievement Council, CSUN, and the Grant/ Van Nuys Cluster. Established as an advisory board, it was agreed to add the voices of community leaders, business representatives, teachers, parents, and students. Under the direction of a facilitator the Roundtable established a working relationship and came to consensus regarding its mission, goals, and guiding principles. The Roundtable effectively provided an opportunity for the unified voice of the PreK-16 Community Collaborative to be heard in the broader community.

First Steps

Our first objective was to directly involve teachers and administrators from the Grant/Van Nuys Cluster and the Committee on Change in preK-16 dialogue. Each school site agreed to formulate a team to participate in a kick-off conference to celebrate the work of coming together. The conference included teams (10 to 12 people per team) from 26 school sites within the Grant/Van Nuys Cluster, a team of 18 professors and deans from CSUN, and 40 facilitators provided by the Achievement Council to work with the teams over a two and one-half day period around issues of improving achievement for all students preK-16. The following recommendations were formed at the conference:

1. The name of the collaborative was to become the PreK-16 Community Collaborative because the Grant/Van Nuys Cluster represents preschools as well as child education centers.

2. Local community college statistical research would be completed to ascertain which had the highest number of students from the Grant/Van Nuys Cluster and invite them to participate.

3. A larger community voice was to be represented on the PreK-16 Community Collaborative and Roundtable.

4. Guiding Principles were to be decided upon to support a set of goals and an action plan.

Since that first step, all the recommendations have been implemented: the name of the collaborative changed from K-16 Community Collaborative to PreK-16 Community Collaborative; statistical research indicated the Los Angeles Valley College as the community college to invite to participate in the collaborative, they have accepted our invitation; a larger community voice from business leaders to parents now sit at the Roundtable, and a mission, goals, and guiding principles have been established.

Mission and Guiding Principles

The mission of the PreK-16 Community Collaborative is to build structures to improve and create opportunities that prepare all students to enter and succeed in colleges, universities, the workplace, and society. The collaborative will even the playing field for under represented student populations by working to enlarge the capacity of schools, colleges, universities, and communities. The goals of the collaborative are:

- To improve the academic preparation for every student at every level, particularly those who are historically under represented to have the choice to enter and succeed in college, the workplace, and society.

- To improve retention and graduation rates of all Los Angeles Valley College and CSUN students, particularly those who are historically under represented.
- To develop meaningful relationships among the Grant/Van Nuys Cluster, Los Angeles Valley College, CSUN, and the larger community.

The guiding principles are:

- Every student (preK-16) must have access to curriculum, guidance, counseling that lead to success in college, the workplace and society.
- Diversity must be viewed as a strength, and must be used to enhance relationships within school and community.
- High expectations and the belief that all students can succeed in college, the workplace and society must be demonstrated throughout the educational community.
- Practices of the collaborative are guided by research and data.

To move from dialogue to action, the Committee on Change and selected guests will meet with approximately 12 cluster teachers to discuss catalytic activities that will link the university to the cluster in meaningful projects that reflect systemic reform. Discussion will center on the themes of literacy, mathematics, and technology. This initial meeting, "On Common Ground," is scheduled for January of 1997 and will include representation from elementary, middle, and high schools.

Funding

Initial funding for the PreK-16 Community Collaborative has been equally shared by the original partners. Each contributed a sum to a general fund. Those funds have been tapped, based on consensus from the group, to support efforts to further the work of the collaborative. For example, the collaborative partners found it vital to the future of the project to retain a development officer and grant writer to generate a complete PreK-16 proposal package to submit to potential government, foundation, and corporate funders. Towards that end, under the guidance of the grant writer, the collaborative partners have established, along with a mission statement and guiding principles, a need statement, history, and major achievements, and an action plan including goals and objectives, timeline, personnel, and budget as a part of its complete proposal package for potential funders. In addition, a variety of services and in-kind contributions have been provided by each of the partner organizations.

Monies have been secured to provide representatives from the anchor organizations opportunities to attend a variety of conferences, including AAHE's Fifth National Conference on "School/College Collaboration: Unfinished Business: Organizing for Student Success K-16" and the Compact/K-16 Council Teams Summer Institute. Participation in the conferences has informed the collaborative about the national effort and allowed them to apply national lessons learned to the local effort.

Challenges and Difficulties Encountered

For collaboration to be effective, both school and university educators must agree to devote the time, energy, and commitment to develop meaningful collegial relationships. Likewise, there needs to be a shared sense of purpose and accountability to function as partners. Both must recognize the expertise and talents and respect and value the contributions the other brings to the reform effort (Lemlech & Hertzog-Foliart, 1993). For the PreK-16 Community Collaborative these prerequisites were and are in place and continue to be evidenced in the work being done. However, throughout the first year of the collaborative there have been many challenges and difficulties which we have encountered. Many of these were predicted, some were not.

University Faculty Attitudes

Our collaborative, like many K-16 reform efforts began with the assumption that **all** students can learn. This has been an assumption by which most K-12 educators have functioned, as they proceed through their daily work. All students can succeed and learn that beyond which he or she already knows. Some university faculty, in contrast, operate on the principle that some students will "get" the material being presented and graduate and others simply will not (Griffith, 1995). This has been, and continues to be, a perplexing problem that we must address. Too often we hear faculty suggesting that university students are adults and share the major burden for their learning, thereby excusing themselves for student failure and likewise responsibility for student achievement and successful graduation.

Through examining the data of student retention and graduation rates we are trying to change some of these pedantic views. As dramatic changes occur in the cultural and socioeconomic characteristics of our students, there are still those reluctant faculty who talk of the past, discussing historical scenarios where all entering students were well-educated, competent, and responsible. They speak of the types of students that made their teaching so much easier and more pleasant.

Incentives and Rewards

For many higher education faculty, K-16 collaboration seems exciting and sparks great interest. Many changes will be required in faculty performance in order to accomplish an aligned, successful, and seamless K-16 education for our students. Higher education faculty will be asked to work with K-12 teachers, parents, and students. Eventually, the questions ultimately and reasonably asked by university faculty are: "Will we be rewarded through the retention, tenure, and promotion process for the time and effort we put toward working with K-12 educators?" and "Will our work be valued by those making decisions about our future on this campus?" In higher education, there is a realistic perception that research is the

primary criteria for decisions on promotability and excluded to a large degree are the areas of teaching and professional service. Collaborative energies are clearly seen by most higher education faculty as professional service. Faculty are cautiously waiting to see if those of us who are spending inordinate amounts of time and energy engaged in this collaboration will in fact be rewarded, or given the "lip service" that so many of our colleagues fear.

School/University Culture

Multiculturalism, although discussed in many settings, rarely focuses on the cultural differences between K-12 public school settings and those of higher education. Through collaboration these differences become more apparent and generate obstacles we must recognize. Public school and university differences can be exemplified in procedures and protocol, fear of not being able to contribute and assist one another, perceptions by public school faculty that elitism by university faculty exists, skepticism of each others' motives, and questions arising around expenditures of financial resources.

One simple illustration of these differences can be characterized by a typical working day for a university professor and a public school teacher. Teachers' responsibilities begin prior to the students' arrival in the morning and continue after students are dismissed at the end of the school day. Unlike K-12 teachers, professors are more autonomous throughout their workday, with disparate time between classes, office hours, and university committee attendance. Professors have far more control over **when** they wish to work and to what task they choose to give their efforts. Public school teachers have a more onerous task when collaborative types of meetings are scheduled during daytime hours. These as well as other dissimilarities in culture need to be taken into consideration when trying to accommodate all the participants and not alienate or exclude members.

Communication

In order to become partners, collaborators must meet. When it is valued that all voices must be heard throughout the participatory decision making process, scheduling becomes problematic. This is particularly true if listening to all the voices and contributions of stakeholders is valued and respected. Location, time, personnel availability, clerical coordination, and division of responsibilities all have at one time or another created barriers in our work. It became obvious that measures have to be taken to assign clear and unambiguous roles and responsibilities to individuals, so that accountability of communication can be established.

A Community University Culture

Research has clearly indicated that the degree to which students feel themselves to be part of a campus community and the extent to which they are involved with their campus and their education are major influences on student learning

(Austin, 1993). The strongest negative effect on student satisfaction is lack of meaningful bonds to a student community. When students perceive themselves to be socially and academically a member of the university not only does satisfaction increase, so does student achievement. To create this type of learning environment at CSUN will be a significant challenge. The large number of transfer students to our campus and the reality that most of our students, due to financial need, interrupt their schooling at some point in time exacerbates the problem. Our university is primarily a commuter campus, with students driving to school primarily to take classes before or after a part-time job. Due to this, feelings of community are even more difficult to accomplish. A further complication is that many of our students are first-generation university learners. The university experience for these students is characteristically different as they break family tradition. For these students a sense of validation, belonging, and community is even more critical.

University life is significantly different from life in secondary schools. Although seniors in high school and university freshman look the same, the world they must encounter when coming on a college campus is problematic at best. This tends to be overlooked as K-12 and higher education faculty collaborate.

Need to See Immediate Results

When time and financial resources are allocated for an endeavor such as this one, immediate forthcoming results are requested and expected. This is especially true for those individuals not intimately involved in the daily, on-going work of the collaborative effort. Building trust, establishing relationships, and creating vehicles to share with one another take time. Public school and university administrators are under a great deal of pressure to rationalize and demonstrate the efficacy of the financial decisions they make. In these times of dwindling resources, interest groups, both internally and externally, are demanding evidence of immediate successful gains stemming from the resources allocated to assist K-16 collaborations. It is the responsibility of those intimately involved to keep administrators informed and apprised so that they may communicate the progress of accomplishments to the schools, departments, and faculty to whom these same resources might have gone.

Discussion

Although schools of education have had a long-standing relationship with K-12 teachers, other university faculty have conversed very little with elementary and secondary educators. As these individuals have begun to share ideas and experiences, many have expressed feelings of optimism. A sense of shared purpose and a spirit of common values have given many faculty at all levels positive outlooks and optimistic attitudes. Many university faculty are beginning to perceive their role as "teachers and mentors" as opposed to "talking heads" or lecterns of wisdom. The university is talking about "student centered" learning and examining ways that

we can be more institutionally friendly to our students through fostering attitudes of genuine interest in the successful progression of our students learning.

Faculty are realizing that complaining about the unpreparedness of incoming high-school students will not improve the situation. Faculty are coming to understand that collaboration with K-12 teachers about curricular expectations and competency of incoming students will bring about significantly more productive results.

The task to create schools in which **all** of our children receive an outstanding education will certainly not be an easy one. Through all the rhetoric of school reform, we must realize that perfect schools can not be created in an imperfect world. Schools are inherently complex institutional systems. The failure to recognize this will put any of our reform efforts in jeopardy. For us to be successful, we must avoid the proclivity to look for **the one** profound answer or approach to our problems. We must devise creative, complex solutions to our complex problems. As H.L. Menkin stated, "For every complex question there is a simple answer...and it is wrong." We are witnessing that K-16 collaboration appears to be a comprehensive way to successfully tackle the complex problems before us. We realize the need to continually remind ourselves that "college begins in kindergarten," not with students' 13th year of schooling.

References

Austin, A.W. (1993). *What matters in college: four critical years revisited.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Edgerton, R. (1994). "Universities, Schools, and the Story of Education," Address to the Issues in Higher Education Forum, Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana, October 13.

Griffith, F.A. (1995). How standards based K-12 reform affect higher education. *American Association of Higher Education Bulletin,* October, 12-15.

Haycock, K. (1994). Higher education and the schools: A call to action and strategy for change. *Metropolitan Universities,* Fall, 17-23.

Lemlech, J., & Hertzog-Foliart, H. (1993). Linking school and university through collegial student teaching. *Teacher Education Quarterly,* 20 (4), 19-27.

Populi, V. (1992). The public takes reform to heart. *Agenda,* Winter, 16-21.

Sarason, S.B. (1990). *The predictable failure and educational reform.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Tye, K. Restructuring our schools: beyond the rhetoric. *Phi Delta Kappan,* September, 10-14.