From the Editor's Desk

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Can there be any question that higher education is experiencing enormous pressure to be more involved in public schools? A quick review of very recent reports from national and regional associations reveals that teacher quality and school-university partnerships are often seen as the most urgent priorities for postsecondary education.

The Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB) recently released its "Ten Public Policy Issues" for 1999-2000. The report highlights the most prominent public policy issues that are likely to demand the attention of higher education's governing boards and campus leaders. For 1999-2000, the #1 issue is "Teacher Prep and the K-12 Relationship."

In July 1999, the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) organization released a report on a survey of the 50 states regarding "Statewide School-College (K-16) Partnerships to Improve Student Performance," by Jonathan Tafel and Nancy Eberhart. They describe numerous efforts to help students prepare for college, to align school-college expectations through changes in college admission policies and practices, and to ensure successful experiences for students who enter college underprepared. The report offers useful technical advice on structuring K-16 collaborative systems, and the authors clearly take the position that student success in college is a shared responsibility of the entire K-16 continuum.

Another recent publication comes from the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education (WICHE): "Working Toward Systemic Change in Higher Education in the West," which draws on three years of forums, workshops, and roundtable sessions that explored how economic and demographic changes in the Western states will compel higher education to change. The first "lesson learned" about pressure for change, especially in regard to student access, is the need for "better higher education/K-12 linkages."

These are only three examples from what seems to be an avalanche of national studies, reports, and calls-to-action that represent an incredible amount of attention to the relationship among the different levels of our public education system. This issue of *Metropolitan Universities* offers a sampling of state and local approaches to collaboration across K-16 systems, with an eye to the special challenges of metropolitan schools and universities. The sum of the articles demonstrates the complexity of this topic, the diversity of regional responses, and the continuing challenges facing universities that get involved in school issues. Note, for example, that the authors vary widely in describing educational systems as P-12, K-12, K-16, and so on. These labels have tremendously important political and policy implications within regional contexts and take on symbolic meanings that reflect priorities, relationships, and expectations.

While the pressure for schools and universities is urgent and the incentives to be responsive can be significant, some cautionary messages seem appropriate. Higher education's response must be realistic if it is to be effective. The rhetoric of partnership must be shaped by the reality of our capacity and our role.

Traditionally, the most obvious and frequent links between higher education and schools take three forms:

- Quality and quantity of new and existing teachers—the preparation and continuing development of teachers who are prepared to excel;
- Articulation between school curricula and college admission requirements; and
- Adequacy of preparation of students for academic success in college.

This is where schools and universities meet and must interact. The three topics represent the "seam" between schools and colleges. In these areas, unfortunately, they have not always been effective partners.

The collaborations discussed by our authors represent attention to these three issues, but some of them also represent movement toward a more complex and involved relationship between universities and schools.

The pressure is growing for universities to become more deeply engaged in issues of school performance, quality, curricula, and outcomes assessment. To a great degree, state policy leaders want more than a so-called seamless educational system, they want higher education to "fix the public schools." In some ways, it seems as if schools are falling so short of public expectations that policy leaders are throwing higher education at the problem out of sheer desperation. The pressure has the potential to take higher education beyond its capacity and beyond its resources.

The question we must ask is: What aspects of school performance can higher education effectively address? While there are compelling reasons for universities to be effective contributors to a seamless educational system, there is reason to express caution about the degree of greater involvement and responsibility higher education can accept regarding overall school improvement. As in any form of outreach or public engagement activity, each university must purposefully commit to partnership activities that match institutional capacities. A generic emphasis on comprehensive and sweeping school-university partnerships presents dangers if they do not, for example, affect some of the serious, if not intractable, problems of schools (e.g., inequitable school funding, hiring practices, and inadequate facilities). The frank reality is that universities can only affect school performance up to a point.

Universities must engage in these partnerships in ways that are compatible with their capacities in the area of school improvement and consistent with their campus mission. Partnerships can have a positive impact on the three traditional categories of school-university interaction described above, and our authors offer many examples. Universities can also work in other ways to enhance schools. University curricular reform and scholarships can help attract talented students to the teaching profession, and prepare them for certification and career effectiveness in the context of regional standards, conditions, and goals. Working with schools on the preparation of students for a smooth transition to college and the articulation of school-college curricula can have a positive impact on student success in both public schools and in college. However, note in the articles that success in curricular reform often depends on new resources, grants, and foundation support. Without such assets and incentives, change is difficult.

Partnerships don't just happen because there seems to be a good reason to work together. Partnerships require careful planning and design if they are to be successful for all participants. As universities identify activities where they believe they can appropriately contribute to school performance, they must be deliberate in how they structure the partner relationship. In 1998, I co-authored a paper with Judith Ramaley, President of the University of Vermont, on the topic of school-university-community partnerships. The paper was prepared for the first-ever joint conference of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Department of Education on the topic of "Connecting Community Building and Education Reform." Drawing on case studies from different communities, we proposed a model describing partnerships as "knowledge relationships" that are characterized by shared learning and exchange of capacity to mutual benefit. In other words, each partner has overlapping needs for new knowledge, but also contributes unique experiential knowledge to the work of the collaboration. Here are the key characteristics of successful school-university-community partnerships:

1. Joint exploration of goals and interests, creating a mutually rewarding agenda;
2. Commitment to early signs of progress;
3. Emphasis on expected benefits and consequences for each organization;
4. Attention to the development of trust and effective communication;
5. A focus on shared learning, information exchange, and capacity-building; and
6. Commitment to assessment and evaluation of partnership activities.

Where these factors exist, the partnership is likely to be effective in terms of drawing on and strengthening both the universities and the schools as they work together, thus avoiding overcommitment or unrealistic expectations.

The point is that the best strategy is to work within the strengths and capacity of the university's role in an educational system. Attention to the three traditional areas of primary emphasis can directly and indirectly assist schools by focusing their attention and enhancing their own strategic planning, but the schools have to be willing to make that commitment. Effective school-university partnerships help increase the capacity of school districts to make their own informed choices and improvements. Universities don't dictate school change.

An additional question is: To what extent is school improvement the business of every university? The reality is that our urban and metropolitan universities are already major hubs of teacher preparation and school partnerships because of our more immediate and integrated involvement with urban communities and their school districts. We prepare the vast majority of teachers for the school work force, and we are often the major source for continuing professional development. As metropolitan universities, our mission compels us to be attentive to the conditions, needs, and assets of our cities, and the role of effective schools is obviously connected to many other critical public concerns. Other universities, in different locations and with different missions, treat education as a less central academic program, and when thinking of public

school improvement, tend to focus almost exclusively on their dissatisfaction with student preparation. As in other areas of public engagement, metropolitan universities can be, and often are, the leaders.

Given this compelling role of education in metropolitan universities, perhaps our most urgent priority is to look to putting our own house in order. We must enhance the quality and performance of our schools of education, purposefully design and assess both teacher preparatory and general education curricula, implement appropriate learning assessments, and create effective links to other faculty in key content areas. In other words, we must be specific and intentional about our role in a "seamless" education system, invest in our own performance, and ensure that we make that role clear and central to the entire university community.

In addition, we must be attentive to the characteristics of our partnership activities with schools. Applying the criteria for effective partnerships that are outlined above means that the university will be purposefully engaging in school partnerships that are likely to strengthen the university as well. We will improve our own programs and performance by being intentional and strategic about engaging in activities and projects that may enhance school performance by drawing on our existing capacities, but also giving us access to new resources and experiences that will enhance the university as well.

Lastly, I would say that we must invest some of our attention to the objective assessment of school-university partnerships and the effectiveness of teacher preparation curricula. The performance of individual schools or school districts is not the only measure of success in partnership work. Again, it is important for partnership activities to have specific, measurable goals for all participants, so that the outcomes of partnership work can be fully understood. Attention to assessment is essential in order to improve future project efforts and to disseminate or replicate effective strategies in new settings. Given the complexity and severity of the public school issue, ongoing evaluation is critical if we are to know what works and, therefore, to make real progress for students. Such an approach will also ensure that we, as engaged metropolitan universities, are productive partners in our interactions with schools and their communities, and that we also benefit from that interaction.