

Moving beyond the Culture Divide:
The Shared Imperative of P-16 Vision and Action
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**K-12 AND HIGHER EDUCATION:
CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AND CONSEQUENCES**

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I am mindful of this audience; every person in the room is deeply experienced and to some extent an expert in primary, secondary, and higher education. These comments aspire to provoke fresh thinking and conversation about a very familiar topic. Let me begin with three propositions.

Propositions:

1. The cultures of K-12 education and higher education in the United States are materially and consequentially different. Each culture is deeply rooted in its traditional purposes and historical development over time. The two cultures reflect legitimate values; both have been generally functional.
2. Changes in the external demands places on our education system are now making both cultures dysfunctional in part.
3. Both cultures must change, converging toward the other in material respects, without homogenization.

I. What are the cultural differences between K-12 and higher education?

K-12 Education

The fundamental purpose of primary and secondary education in the United States is basic, universal education. Its core values have been equity of opportunity and universal attainment to the “minimum” standards required for participating as a citizen in a democratic society. We have called our schools “common,” and our teacher education institutions “normal,” words that emphasize their universality and fundamental nature. The schools were designed to achieve wide-spread literacy, civic education, and the fundamental skills essential for a productive, satisfying life in our democratic nation.

Although we have embraced the idea of “local” control over community schools, the states have vigorously asserted their responsibility for the quality and equality of primary and secondary education. (This is not to suggest they have adequately achieved either.) State laws regulate many aspects of primary and secondary education, including the length of the instructional year, curricular standards, assessments, sometimes textbooks, and in most places dozens of less consequential matters. The “school code” in most states

covers dozens of topics and is many pages thick. Most state boards of education have hundreds of staff members to implement and monitor compliance with state laws.

Higher Education

The original purpose, and still dominant cultural value in higher education is the education of elites. Thomas Jefferson, perhaps the best educated of the nation's founders, and a strong advocate of universal education, illustrated this value in his scheme for progressively selecting the most gifted students at every level of education for advancement to the next level. At public expense the top one or two students at every level would be advanced to the next, culminating in a scholarship to the University of Virginia. Through this means, Jefferson wrote, "we can rake a few geniuses from the rubble."

The core values in higher education are selectivity, not universality, the advancement of knowledge, and the propagation of scholars. The "universe" is the purview of the university, not universal attainment. And it is difficult to be in a conversation about education today without hearing somebody say, "College is not for everybody." Academic freedom, while relevant at every level, is a much stronger force in the culture of higher education.

Although the states and the nation have made substantial investments to achieve widespread access and participation in higher education, the regulatory environment for higher education is substantially different from the K-12 situation. The idea that higher education is "different" in purpose has influenced public policy. Most state statutes governing higher education deal with general matters, far short of the detailed laws and regulations imposed on primary and secondary education. The laws governing higher education tend to take many fewer pages than those governing K-12, and typically state boards for higher education have small staffs in comparison to their K-12 counterparts.

II. How have these cultures become dysfunctional?

The growth of a global, knowledge economy is challenging the American educational system and its dominant cultures. The American workforce is among the world's most expensive, and other nations are rapidly matching (and in some cases exceeding) the educational attainment of Americans, especially younger Americans.

To respond successfully to this challenge K-12 education must educate more students to a higher standard, and higher education must admit and graduate a larger fraction of the population without compromising quality. In some respects, we now need to bring average Americans (the middle third in the distribution of academic aptitude) to a level of educational attainment (knowledge and skill) that once was necessary only for the top 20% to 30% in academic aptitude.

The universal perspective of the traditional K-12 culture (No Child Left Behind) is functional in this situation. Its tradition of specifying the means for delivering education

(as opposed to ends) is not. Greater educational attainment for average and especially for disadvantaged students is likely to require more creativity and experimentation than seems to be feasible in highly regimented public schools. If my presumption about flexibility is accurate, to be successful teachers will need more discretion in how they work with students, and school leaders will need more discretion in how they utilize resources and how they deploy and supervise talent. The recognition of these issues is one factor driving the charter school movement, and the pressure for voucher systems. (Less constructively, the desire to improve schools by increasing selectivity is likely also a factor in the attractiveness of “choice” options.)

Higher education’s traditions of inter-institutional competition, its relative autonomy and freedom, and its focus on pushing achievement higher and higher are functional in this environment. Its drive for greater selectivity, its relative neglect of the teaching function, and its ambivalence about specifying learning standards and rigorous assessment of learning are not. Although only a fraction of colleges and universities spend valuable resources in a “positional arms race” in search of higher prestige, the culture of selectivity shapes the behavior of most institutions. Higher education must de-emphasize sorting and selecting and pay more attention to enabling students to achieve higher levels of learning. We need to find better ways of transmitting knowledge and developing intellectual skills, without falling into the trap of standardized mediocrity.

III. Should we try to change the cultures? If so, how, and how much?

I began thinking about K-12 and higher education “culture” when confronted with proposals to create “seamless” P-16 or P-20 systems. Obviously the imperative driving such proposal is the need for greater educational attainment. And the “gap” between K-12 and higher education is just as clearly an important obstacle to the improvement of educational outcomes.

But a “seamless” educational system with either the existing culture of K-12 or of higher education in America is unlikely to give us the results we need. And the two “cultures” are probably the most intractable aspects of American education.

Even if it were feasible, homogenizing the cultures of K-12 and higher education doesn’t seem like a good idea. But we do need to work together much more effectively, and both cultures will need to change in order to meet the challenges of more widespread educational attainment. It will be interesting to see how we work this out.