

## **Executive Summary**

### **ALF/A+ Convocation on Public Education “Closing The Gap By Closing The Gaps” March 28, 2006**

The list below offers an analysis of participants’ responses to the presentations of the Texas Education Commissioner of Education and the Commissioner of Higher Education at the Convocation on Public Education in March, 2006. The list and its comments were generated from handwritten notes taken from small group discussions immediately following these presentations.

In particular, the mixed groups, representing close to 300 participants of educators, business, community, parents and students leaders, were asked to document their ideas for best practices to promote a path for students to succeed in college.

#### **Begin early**

Most participants recognized the need to address college at an earlier age, some even recommended beginning in kindergarten. They suggested that schools begin to focus on college in a variety of ways, including offering rigorous coursework, instructing students about college and its benefits, offering developmental education, and asking students to discuss their long-term goals. The ultimate objective is to create expectations for college as early as possible.

#### **Curriculum development and alignment**

Groups promoted the idea of connecting high school and college curricula, particularly through partnerships with universities and community colleges. In addition, many criticized the manner in which TAKS testing often took K-12 education out of alignment with the skills necessary to gaining entry to and being successful in college. Some educators suggested that TEA specifically realign TAKS to address the curriculum gap between high school and college. Others noted that curricula should flexibly adapt to particular learning styles.

#### **Reducing transition shock**

The transition between different levels of education can often be jarring or disheartening, even from middle school to high school. Participants suggested that schools and universities work together and form partnerships to reduce the distance from elementary school to college and to ease the transition from high school to college. For example, colleges could form feeder patterns, moving local high school students directly into the college pathway.

#### **Parental involvement, education, and support**

Parents were cited as a keystone of the college-bound process. Intimate involvement in their children’s education from an early age was cited as critical if we expect parents to promote the *idea* of college to their children. Schools and other groups must also provide

parental education about college, the college-entrance process including admissions requirements, and financial assistance and planning..

### **College visits, field trips, and exposure**

Students need to become more aware of what college will be like when they get there and what they can expect from their college experience. This could be most easily facilitated through partnerships or bridge programs between community colleges and their local school districts.

### **Changing culture**

Students need to believe that they are college-bound. Much of the inertia towards this idea rests in a stagnant and complacent student culture. Schools, community, and family need to promote high aspirations and place greater value in college. At the same time, both teachers and parents need to develop a culture of collaboration and communication in order to allow the flow and response of ideas and values about college.

### **Image and marketing**

Many groups called for marketing campaigns that would promote a college-bound culture, describe the benefits of college, and generally get students and parents interested and excited about college. In addition, some educators pointed out that too much emphasis has been placed on “top tier” universities while community colleges, in particular, are stigmatized as low quality institutions. An image campaign, they suggested, might help reduce that stigma and prove that community colleges have much to offer as a viable alternative or stepping stone toward 4-year degrees.

### **Community outreach**

The community, in general, could serve as a valuable resource to promote college-bound achievement. In addition, more community-related programs, like Project Grad, could promote student interaction with colleges. At the same time, educators pointed out the need to target the entire community to re-think education as P-16, rather than K-12. This would popularize the idea that students are expected to attend college.

### **Mentorship, partnerships and counseling**

Having college students interact with public school students would offer valuable guidance for students interested in college today. This interaction could take different forms. Many suggested that college students could act as mentors for students. Others suggested that colleges, academic departments or parts of the college could form partnerships with specific schools or school districts.

### **Personalizing and individualizing plans and paths**

Participants pointed out that each student’s path through education may be different and that a college plan will not be uniform for all students. Some suggested that the college-bound plans expand to include alternatives to baccalaureate degrees, such as technical degrees and certificates. Others stressed the need for individualized planning for higher education. This would require intensive counseling that would begin at an early age, allowing schools to better understand student expectations and trying to influence

students in their education plans. For example, schools could offer career path plans with concrete examples of how students can achieve the occupation they most desire. At the same time, schools need to more closely track the progress of their students by maintaining a consistent interaction between smaller groups of students and the same small pool of teachers and counselors.

### **Summer programs, internships, and further training**

Summer internships, especially paid internships, were considered a valuable instrument in helping students understand the types of skills needed to achieve in the workplace and to promote an interest in higher education, which could help them move closer to those jobs. In addition, summer programs were suggested which could continue the education process throughout the course of the whole year, preventing what a few educators considered a period of educational stagnation. Some educators even promoted lengthening the school year or the school day – though others felt that schools should make a better quality effort with the time they do have.

### **Attention for the under-represented**

Many suggestions centered on offering special attention to African-Americans and Latinos. One group suggested forming partnerships with Mexican universities.