Creating an Effective Relationship with Higher Education

For several years, state boards of education have been engaged in improving elementary and secondary education systems across the nation. Intrinsic to the success of these efforts has been a focus on higher education, its role in the training of teachers for more complex instruction, and its relationship to preparing workers for the next century. States continue to promote the alignment of admission requirements for institutions of higher education to the standards and assessments established by the state and to identification of non-baccalaureate approaches to post-secondary education.

In 1994, NASBE conducted a study group on state board linkages with higher education and produced the report, Learning for a Lifetime. The work of the study group focused on the exploration of the intersecting roles and responsibilities of state boards of education and post-secondary boards. The study group also explored how collaborative partnerships could be forged and strong linkages built for achieving systemic education reform. The study group’s message continues to be relevant: “Linkages [between state boards of education and post-secondary boards] are critical for the development of complementary and coherent policies that should characterize a seamless system of learning for a lifetime.”

As state boards of education persist in efforts to improve schools, it is important to ensure that their relationships with higher education are structured to support boards’ efforts in school reform. Linkages such as those advocated by the NASBE study group require outreach to the higher education community by the state board of education. The study group identified several factors that are tied to the need for more collaboration between the boards of higher education and elementary-secondary education. These include:

- New economic realities;
- Issues of equity;
- Calls for more effective linkages;
- The need for policy linkages; and
- Building effective linkages for a system of lifelong learning.

New Economic Realities

For over a decade, business leaders and educators alike have become increasingly vocal in calling for an education system that will produce the world-class work force demanded by a global, more technologically-based market-place. The world of work has changed: it is more complex; it’s more competitive. The economy demands not only higher skills, but because of rapidly changing technological advances, it also demands continual acquisition of new skills and knowledge. It demands better development of human capital. Secondary and post-secondary partnerships are critical to ensuring that students are learning and preparing for work in the twenty-first century. State boards of education must lead the way in forging these partnerships.

Issues of Equity

Shifting demographics and unparalleled access to post-secondary education have brought dramatic increases in the number of people of color, women, and older persons entering programs of study. However, despite these tremendous gains in access, equity remains a serious issue. According to the National Assessment
of Educational Progress (NAEP), fewer than half the students who enroll in higher education graduate. The American Association of Higher Education reports that members of minority ethnic groups are more likely to drop out. Solutions to this critical problem depend increasingly upon collaborative approaches to recruitment, admission, standards, and assessments on the part of state boards of education and post-secondary boards.

**Calls for More Effective Linkages**

Several years ago, the Wingspread Group on Higher Education expressed concern for higher education’s lack of engagement with the reform movements under way in the nation’s schools. No longer, the group argued, could the nation’s 3400 colleges and universities afford to focus solely on higher education. If those in higher education and on post-secondary boards do not take action to become involved in education reform, state legislators and others outside of the domain of higher education may step in and begin mandating closer connections. Clearly, it would be far more desirable, beneficial, and productive if the inevitable policy changes are initiated by those who are responsible for post-secondary education.

**The Need for Policy Linkages**

Education and research groups are looking at the policies that affect the relationships between elementary and secondary schools and post-secondary institutions. Moreover, state and federal legislation has been implemented that rewards the alignment of elementary and secondary education with post-secondary education. Policies on teacher education and professional development have seen the most notable progress in this area. Underlying these policy changes, legislative actions, and research focus is a vision of education as a unified system of lifelong learning and work force preparation that begins early in childhood and extends to training programs and advanced degrees.

**Building Effective Linkages for a System of Lifelong Learning**

To ensure a system of lifelong learning, there must be systemic education reform and significant change in the way state boards of education and post-secondary boards do business with each other and with all stakeholder groups in their states. The challenge of building effective linkages can be met through coordinating commissions or similar linking structures that set as their mission the achievement of consensus on the development and implementation of education policies that are either collaborative, compatible, or coordinated.

Recommendations on establishing linkage structures like coordinating commissions involving K-12 and post-secondary governing and policymaking boards, as well as ways to strengthen existing linkages between K-12 and higher education, can be found in the NASBE report, *Learning for a Lifetime*. 