

Testimony for the National Commission on Accountability in Higher Education Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education

Prepared by:

Dr. Dolores Mize, Associate Vice Chancellor and Special Assistant to the Chancellor and Dr. Debra Stuart, Vice Chancellor for Administration and Board Relations

For the Oklahoma State Regents, accountability is more than just our accountability products, such as our report cards or presentations to the State Legislature for funding. Accountability is a comprehensive public policy focus that begins with the support of student preparation in K-12 schools and continues through support for the lifelong learning opportunities available to Oklahomans in our system of public higher education.

Pre-Collegiate Initiatives

College Access and Success

The single greatest way to promote access to higher education in America is to ensure that students in grades K-12 have a rigorous academic experience. Rigorous preparation closes achievement gaps and positions students for college-level learning upon exiting high school. However, no matter how well prepared students are, if the financial means aren't there to pay for college, they may hit the proverbial brick wall. The same holds true for financial aid – aid given purely on the basis of need is most successful if the student is adequately prepared for college. Without the academic preparation necessary to be successful in college, access granted through a purely financial approach may end up being “empty access,” as students aren't as likely to continue college and obtain a degree or credential.

Oklahoma's State Regents have worked to promote student preparation for almost 15 years. Because of high remediation rates during the late 1980's and the school reforms in the early 1990's, the State Regents increased admission standards for Oklahoma's public colleges and universities. They also, however, simultaneously created special programs to support rigorous preparation and make certain that no students “fell through the cracks” because of the increased admission standards. These special programs are now being institutionalized. Effectively designed, they remain dynamic and flexible enough to continue meet the changing needs of the Oklahoma population today and in the future.

Two of these programs, the Educational Planning and Assessment System (EPAS) and the Oklahoma Higher Learning Access Program (OHLAP) form the student preparation policy backbone for what has more recently come to be called a “K-16” or “K-21” focus nationally. State Regents in Oklahoma were involved in such activities well in advance of the national call among public policy organizations for higher education to engage in helping students be prepared for college. Ultimately, the value of the EPAS and OHLAP programs resides in their outcomes – both have shown positive outcomes on Oklahoma high school students' readiness for college. Even with these improvements, more work remains to be done.

Academic Preparation – Improving Performance

In 1993, with social justice goals in mind, the Oklahoma State Regents and ACT, Inc. developed a comprehensive student preparation system, the Oklahoma Educational Planning and Assessment System (EPAS). The State Regents fund EPAS at no cost to participating local school districts. Participation expanded to 106 districts in 1995, and then grew in subsequent years. In 2003-2004's academic year, 499 public school districts and private schools participate in EPAS, representing approximately 98 percent of Oklahoma's eighth and 10th grade public school enrollment.

Concurrent with Oklahoma's EPAS growth, ACT, Inc. developed the *Standards for Transition* for all three EPAS assessments. These standards represent competencies—what students are likely to know and be able to do at various score ranges on the assessments. ACT also developed another early intervention tool, *the Pathways for Transition*. The *Pathways* are directly linked to the *Standards for Transition*, and inform teachers, students, and parents about skills to work on to advance learning to the next higher score range. With these new mechanisms in place, State Regents had the tools necessary to make EPAS a school improvement system, as well as a student preparation system.

In December of 1999, the State Regents replaced a locally-derived document outlining core competencies for collegiate success with the ACT *Standards for Transition*. With that change in policy, Oklahoma higher education aligned college-entry expectations for knowledge and skills with: (1) EPAS student achievement assessments; (2) student transitions information services that begin in middle school; (3) early academic and guidance intervention strategies, and (4) predictive collegiate success measures based on historical ACT assessment results.

Within EPAS, scores on the ACT assessment function as both predictive measures of collegiate success and outcome measures of academic preparation. Data reports that link the assessments in EPAS also provide information about the value-added from one transition point to the next. With EPAS, Oklahoma has been able to measure added educational value for some time.

EPAS takes into account students' initial standing before looking at the value added by instruction. By analyzing student performance longitudinally, a student acts as his or her own control. Gain in knowledge and skill is always relative to students' standings from previous years. EPAS linkage reports measure student progress from one transition point to the next, and identify whether students are performing below, at, or above expected achievement. The linkage reports measure student performance relative to their baseline *and* to similar students from across the country. EPAS has seen positive results:

Oklahoma Indicators of EPAS Progress
<p>Academic Achievement</p> <p>Oklahoma ACT scores have risen, even as more students take the test.¹ In 1987, fifty-four percent of college-bound Oklahoma high school seniors took the ACT. In 2003, that percentage had risen to 73 percent. The average ACT score increased from 19.5 to 20.5, inching closer to the national average of 20.8.</p> <p>Students are setting more rigorous academic course schedules. In 1992, forty-percent of college-bound seniors took ACT-recommended core curriculum to prepare for college. By 2003, fifty-nine percent reported taking the recommended core.</p> <p>Every year since 1997, student educational aspirations have risen between the 8th and 10th grades and between the 11th and 12th grades. Students typically upgrade their educational aspirations to the level of a two or four-year college degree. Students who increase their educational aspirations during these transitions typically also upgrade their core course-taking plans in high school.</p> <p>Oklahoma is one of only three Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) states to make gains on the national ACT Composite average over the past decade.</p>

¹ Typically, as more students of varying ability take the test, the aggregate average remains stable or declines.

Oklahoma Indicators of EPAS Progress

Narrowing Gaps

EPAS, though aimed at all students, has helped narrow some of Oklahoma's achievement gaps. The percent of African American students completing the ACT core curriculum increased 17 percentage points in eleven years (from 38 percent in 1992 to 55 percent in 2003). African American students in Oklahoma have outscored their national peers on the ACT for the past six years, as have American Indian students. Hispanic students have done so for the past four years.

More students are heading to college. In 1987, thirty-two percent of seniors planned to attend college. In 2003, eighty-six percent planned on education beyond high school.

Students in EPAS upgrade their core course taking plans between the 8th and 10th grades. In 2003, forty-four percent of 8th graders planning on attending a four-year college indicated they would be taking core courses in high school. Tenth graders showed 82 percent planning on taking core.²

There is a strong, positive relationship among EPAS between students' plans for postsecondary education, their reported core course taking plans, and scores on the EXPLORE and PLAN tests. Through EPAS interventions, students who upgrade their plans for postsecondary education between the 8th and 10th grades also upgrade their core course taking plans, and scores are better for students who do so.

Financial Preparation – Tied to Academic Readiness

No matter how well students are prepared academically, if they do not have the financial means to attend postsecondary education, access is denied. In Oklahoma, we are specifically targeting this problem with another important initiative that supports the work of EPAS, the Oklahoma Higher Learning Access Program (OHLAP).

The Oklahoma Legislature created OHLAP in 1992 and administration of the program was placed with the State Regents in 1996. Originally, OHLAP was a program aimed purely at low-income students; the family income cap for OHLAP was \$24,000 for several years. Because of the academic achievement shown by OHLAP students and because of financial aid need over and above that income limit, the legislature raised the family income cap to \$32,000 in 2000 and \$50,000 in 2001. OHLAP requires that students enroll in the program in the 8th, 9th, or 10th grades; promise to take a challenging, 17 units of core academic courses in high school; maintain a 2.5 GPA in core courses and in overall coursework; and stay away from drugs, alcohol or delinquent behavior. OHLAP students are also participating in EPAS in their schools, giving us links between the motivational components that comprise OHLAP with the early intervention components afforded by EPAS to comprehensively prepare students for the future.

Upon completing the requirements of the OHLAP program, students receive a tuition award up to the baccalaureate degree in any accredited Oklahoma postsecondary institution, including private colleges and universities, career technology schools, and all public two-year and four-year institutions.

² Though the two cohorts presented here are indeed separate cohorts within a single academic year, the trend toward this large an increase between single cohort changes in upgrading core course taking plans is consistent with the two-cohort data presented.

OHLAP provides the early *motivation* to succeed and the *hope* young people in Oklahoma need. Students are made responsible for their postsecondary education by entering into an early agreement for their high school academic course taking and social behavior. OHLAP, in particular, provides a safety net for students financially that allows them to focus on academic achievement and good citizenship.

OHLAP Academic Indicators: 2002-2003 Academic Year

- OHLAP students consistently have higher GPAs than their peers. In 2002-2003, OHLAP average GPA was 3.49 versus 3.00 for all Oklahoma high school seniors;
- OHLAP students consistently score higher than the state average on the ACT assessment. For 2002-2003, OHLAP students ACT average was 21.1 versus 20.5 for the state average. OHLAP students have also consistently outscored the national ACT average, which was 20.8 for the 2002-2003 school year.
- High school to college going rates for OHLAP students far exceed those of their peers. This year, OHLAP student college-going rate was 79 percent versus 58 percent for all high school graduates;
- College remediation rates are lower, speaking to the impact of the strong core curriculum. OHLAP freshman remediation rate was 32.5 percent versus 36.5 percent for all 2001 first-time freshmen;
- College GPAs for OHLAP students exceed those of their peers--86.3 percent of 2002 OHLAP freshmen scored 2.0 or better versus 72.5 percent of 2001-2002 freshmen;
- Freshman to sophomore persistence rates for OHLAP students exceed those of their peers. Among OHLAP students, 83.1 percent persisted to the second year of college in 2001 versus 79.4 percent of all students.

Enrollment in OHLAP has soared since the increase of the family income cap to \$50,000 and since the GEAR UP program allowed for direct outreach to students and schools. Public engagement efforts since 1999 funded through OHLAP and GEAR UP have also contributed to the increase in enrollment. OHLAP completion rates are also up, contributing to the necessity to consider OHLAP as a major priority for the future of student preparation.

GEAR UP: A Capstone for K-16 Student Preparation Efforts

The federal Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) initiative has been pivotal in aiding Oklahoma's efforts in student preparation. In 1999, a state grant and 10 partnership grant programs were awarded to Oklahoma. Since then, additional grants have subsequently been awarded to school districts and universities. The state grant program, administered by the Oklahoma State Regents, is coordinated with all partnership efforts, and supports all partnership programs through EPAS, OHLAP, and GEAR UP public engagement support. GEAR UP is a capstone K-16 effort in Oklahoma. It involves higher education, K-12 education, business partners, and community organizations. It involves state-level and grass roots community effort.

Postsecondary Initiatives

Higher Education Report Card

The Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education publish a report card that measures the State System's progress against other states and sets state-level goals for performance. The Oklahoma report card addresses the same issues as the national report card, *Measuring Up*, (preparation, participation, benefits, student affordability and completion). For the measures in each of these categories, as well as an additional one on resources and funding, the State Regents have published a baseline from which to measure progress, current status, benchmark to a national ideal and a goal tied to specific initiatives. Also included are a number of facts that are of interest to higher education constituents: external funding,

faculty salaries, expenditures per FTE students, average tuition and fees, enrollments and degrees, employment after graduation, and non-credit activity. The Oklahoma report card is available on the State Regents website.

An evaluation of the effectiveness of the report card is being conducted. The primary target audience is the legislature and Governor; however, students and parents have used the report card to better understand the issues impacting higher education. Based on the evaluation, other formats for displaying information will be developed; also the number and types of measures will be revised.

Performance Funding to Improve Collegiate Outcomes

In 1999, the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education adopted the Brain Gain 2010 Initiative to increase the percentage of the adult population with associate and bachelor's degrees above the 2010 projected national average. In 2001, the State Regents drafted a performance funding plan that would support this initiative by rewarding institutions for improving on measures related to this initiative. "Brain Gain Funding" has been used to allocate \$6.6 million in the past three years based on the number of degrees conferred, first-year retention rates, and six-year graduation rates within the state which includes transfer activity unlike the national measures. The goal is to gradually increase the annual Brain Gain funds to two percent of the state E & G allocation to higher education.

Unlike some performance funding processes in other states, the Oklahoma model is working because it was developed from a clear unwavering message from the State Regents and collaboration with the institutional Presidents. The goal is simple and specific, to support the Brain Gain 2010 Initiative, and the dollar amounts are commensurate with the number of measures included in the funding formula. That is, there is an explicit recognition that Brain Gain Funding does not reward the institutions for all of their performance, such as research and service.

National Assessment – Towards Measurement of College-Level Learning

Measuring Up, gave incomplete grades to all states because there are no standard measures for assessing the learning that occurs in college. Therefore, the National Forum on College-Level Learning is conducting a pilot study with five states (Oklahoma, Kentucky, Nevada, South Carolina and Illinois). In Oklahoma, all public two-year and four-year institutions and four private institutions participated in this project. Approximately 100 students on each campus took a two-hour test and alumni from the four-year institutions responded to a survey of how their college education has been applicable to their lives after graduation. The institutions went to extraordinary efforts to get a representative group of students tested. Their reward will be that they significantly moved us closer to understanding how well each state is performing and they had the opportunity to try some newly developed instruments that can be incorporated into their outcomes assessment plans.

Oklahoma was on of the five states selected for this project because, since 1991, the State Regents have had a mandated, system-wide, student assessment policy. The institutions report annually on entry-level course placement, general education competencies, program outcomes findings, student satisfaction, and the impact this information has had on institutional decision-making. There are some common measures among institutions. Oklahoma also is one of five states awarded a FIPSE grant for best practices in accountability. Oklahoma will serve as the "expert" state on student learning and public awareness based on previous work with EPAS and GEAR UP. The State Regents' state-level report card has received favorable national attention and staff members have contributed their expertise in numerous efforts to develop common state-level measures with the U.S. Department of Education and the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) data exchange.