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Academic Rigor Key to Breaking Barriers to College and Career Success

Academic rigor—or lack of it—was on the minds of many of those participating in the ACT annual meeting October 18–19 in Iowa City. ACT's board of directors, advisory board members, and staff, plus state legislators and distinguished guests, shared their thoughts and ideas during the two-day event.

Many of their concerns fit well with the theme of the meeting, "Breaking Barriers: Ensuring College and Career Success." There clearly was consensus that by establishing more rigorous academic standards, we will help all students be prepared for success—in school and in the workplace.



J. Theodore Sanders, member of the ACT board of directors and executive chairman of The Cardean Learning Group in Chicago

"Part of the problem is that we lack a sense of national, state, local, and individual urgency about this issue," said J. Theodore Sanders, a member of the ACT board of directors and executive chairman of The Cardean Learning Group in Chicago. "We need urgency to accelerate the nation's attention toward a problem that we now understand more clearly than ever. ACT can play a significant role in creating that sense of urgency."

Richard L. Ferguson, ACT CEO and chairman of the board, noted that while college enrollments have increased by three million in the past 10 years, many students are entering college underprepared. All students need to be developing the basic skills required for college and work as early as middle school. He cited examples of schools that have implemented ACT's programs, including the EXPLORE[®] and PLAN[®] tests, as a way of instilling more rigor at the lower grade levels and, thus, better preparing students for high school and college-level work.



Richard L. Ferguson, ACT CEO and chairman of the board

"We need to provide standards of quality for rigor so we can determine whether students are

learning the appropriate skills. Such standards will also lend insights into curriculum development and delivery," said Ferguson. He added that by equipping students with the right skills, we can help narrow the gap between the skills students offer and those employers need.

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—J. Theodore Sanders,
member, ACT Board of Directors

Increasing academic rigor as early as middle school and improving teacher quality will go a long way toward ensuring success in college and the workforce, said Carl A. Cohn, an ACT board member and superintendent of the San Diego City Schools. "We need to broaden the scope of high school reform to include increasing rigor at the middle school level so we get better-prepared students coming into high school."



Carl A. Cohn, ACT board member and superintendent of the San Diego City Schools

We also need to make sure we include students considered underserved, said Cohn. "California is experiencing what Iowa will be experiencing in 10 to 20 years—an increase in the number of students of color. Sixty to 65 percent of pre-K through grade 12 students in California are students of color and, thus, they are underserved students." Cohn said most of these students were born in California, are American citizens, and come from hard-working families who struggle to make a living.

At a recent meeting of the California State University System Board, on which Cohn serves, board members were asked what impact the system can have on education. For Cohn, it goes back to rigor within the core subjects. We talk a lot about rigor in algebra, Cohn said, but "teachers don't realize that math is not our biggest problem. Reading comprehension is our biggest problem."

"ACT is, and always has been, about helping people to prepare themselves for success, whether for a next level of education, a job, or a career change."

—Richard L. Ferguson,
ACT CEO and chairman of the board

Ultimately, Cohn said, board members need to get away from their campuses to inform the

underserved community. "We need to meet people where they are and in their own cultures," he said. He has done this through a program aimed at Latino mothers whose students are in fifth through seventh grades. The program helps those mothers guide their children to ensure they take the courses needed to get into college. He and his colleagues have also visited large churches in the Latino, African American, and Vietnamese communities to provide "The Path to College" information to parents of sixth-grade and seventh-grade students.

Engaging the Public is Crucial



Roberts T. Jones,
ACT board member and
president of Education
and Workforce Policy, Inc.

Roberts T. Jones, another ACT board member and president of Education and Workforce Policy, Inc., said ACT can play a significant role in raising academic rigor. "ACT needs to become a leader in this debate. It has the voice, it has the respect, and it has the ability to take significant steps to prepare people."

Part of the solution includes engaging the public in the dialogue, said Dixie Axley, ACT board member and vice president, learning and development, State Farm Insurance Companies. "People are more likely to change their minds if they are talking instead of listening. We need to understand their point of view, their reality, at the community level. ACT has a unique opportunity to drive dialogue and validate solutions for the community that will implement them."

At the same time, we must stop blaming the public schools for everything that goes wrong with teacher training. "We have identified the skill sets that students need to be successful in higher education. Now we need to get a dialogue going between high school and higher education. We need to get each to understand the other's expectations, and we need college faculty to accept some responsibility for what goes on in K-12," said Belle Wheelan, ACT board member and president of the Commission on Colleges, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. Wheelan suggested statewide meetings to bring K-12 and higher education together to talk about problems and solutions.



Belle Wheelan, ACT board
member and president of
the Commission on
Colleges, Southern
Association of Colleges
and Schools



State standards need to be more universal and set at levels that meet postsecondary and workforce demands. "State



Bob Graham, ACT board member and former Florida governor and U.S. senator

standards drive teacher training, curriculum, textbooks, exams, and more," said Bob Graham, an ACT board member and former Florida governor and U.S. senator. "ACT could really be helpful in guiding states in a comprehensive reevaluation of state standards and ensuring these requirements meet the needs of higher education and employment."

Jones said the entire debate isn't about institutions. "It's about students and the world they are going to walk into." As the job market becomes more volatile, the set of basic skills they will need to succeed evolves. No longer do we need to know just how to read and write. We must also be able to adapt to an ever-changing world, including keeping pace with technology.

Axley agreed, noting that "illiterate" in this county has new meaning. "It no longer applies just to people who can't read, but also to those who can't learn, unlearn, and relearn. The employees who succeed today are those who keep learning from the minute they arrive on the job," she said.



Dixie Axley, ACT board member and vice president, learning and development, State Farm Insurance

Revising state standards could create a sense of urgency, she said. "We need to get out of the paradigm of status quo without much challenge."

Linking Education to the Economy

Status quo achieves very little, as the state of Michigan has learned. The state has made tremendous gains in the past two years, as Governor Jennifer M. Granholm has made education her top priority, particularly in the area of K-8 standards. In the past, Michigan high school students had to take only one required course to graduate; now they must take 16. And instead of being told they need four units of this and three units of that, they are given the names of courses they'll need to take to graduate.

Coming into office, Governor Granholm faced a \$1 billion deficit. Today, it's \$4 billion, a situation that has motivated her to "diversify and grow" Michigan's economy. To do that, Michigan needs an educated workforce, said Sue Carnell, the governor's education policy advisor and an annual meeting panelist.

"We've linked education to the economy," she said. "Our goal is to double the number of people in Michigan who have a college degree—whether that's four-year, two-year, or a certificate—to meet the demands of the sector." Currently, 22 percent of Michigan residents have a bachelor's degree or higher.

With increased higher education also comes an increase in salaries and a lower unemployment rate. The goal, Carnell said, is to focus on "brain work" not "brawn work"—encouraging more Michigan young people to get through college and more adults already in the labor market to upgrade their skills.

Preparing students to succeed in the global marketplace is the goal of "Smart Core," the required curriculum that is part of Next Step, a state initiative focused on improving Arkansas public high schools. "Smart Core holds schools accountable for academic rigor. It's where the rubber hits the road," said Kenneth James, commissioner of the Arkansas Department of Education and also an annual meeting panelist. Beginning with the class of 2010, Smart Core will be the default curriculum.

James said Arkansas needs Smart Core: 52 percent of students going to college require remediation, 75 percent of employers in Arkansas claim that half of high school graduates lack basic skills, and 20 percent of Arkansas ninth graders do not earn a high school diploma. In addition, the state wants to increase the number of residents with bachelor's degrees; currently 15 percent of the population has a bachelor's degree.

Ultimately, he said, the goal is to convince students of the validity of Smart Core's slogan: "My future: What I thought was the ending is just the beginning."

Overall, the speakers and panelists throughout the annual meeting agreed that helping educators and policymakers increase academic rigor and raise standards are important priorities for ACT.

"ACT is, and always has been, about helping people to prepare themselves for success, whether for a next level of education, a job, or a career change," Ferguson said. "Our work is focused on breaking down the barriers that keep people from following their dreams and reaching their goals."

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