TRANSITIONING FROM HIGH SCHOOL

White Paper

Based on the conference "Transitions from High School to Postsecondary Education and the Labor Force"*

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December 1999

* Preparation of this paper was supported by National Science Foundation (Grant # REC-9725509). This paper is intended to promote the exchange of ideas among researchers and policy makers. The views expressed here are those of the authors and do not represent their institution or the granting agency.

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Preface

On October 6, 1999 a one-day conference on **Transitions from High School to Postsecondary Education and the Labor Force** was held in Washington, D.C. Funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF), this meeting was designed to address the issues of transition from high school through a multidisciplinary perspective. The transition process is central not only to the research agenda of the granting agency but to other federal agencies as well. There is a sense in the research community that many questions regarding this transition process need to be investigated from multiple viewpoints. Some of these questions center on: the benefits of longitudinal studies that consider adolescent development and family contexts; the opportunities and constraints of postsecondary institutions to cope with a growing, educationally ambitious, student population; and the economic and social consequences of an increasingly educated workforce.

In 1998, investigators who had NSF grants were invited to consider hosting a conference that would be treated as a supplement to their existing funding. We successfully applied to hold a conference as an extension of our research grant, "Secondary School Curricular Reform and Postsecondary Education Success" (REC-9725509). This grant examines the relationship between students' academic experiences in high school and their success in postsecondary education. Using data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988-94 (NELS:88-94), High School and Beyond (HS&B), and the National Longitudinal Study of 1972 (NLS-72), and several postsecondary education datasets, this project was designed to determine: (1) the effects of high school experiences on crystallizing career decisions in postsecondary school; (2) the effects that rigorous course-taking and instructional practices in high school have on postsecondary school choice, matriculation, and continuation; and (3) the influence of families and teachers on student college selection and continuation in postsecondary education.

Preliminary findings from this grant revealed complex patterns related to transitions that cannot be fully examined from a single disciplinary perspective. For example, we found that the profile of young people who enter the labor force after high school has shifted substantially over the past thirty years, with more recent labor force entrants showing; lower

test scores, less rigorous course taking in high school, and more behavioral and disciplinary problems in high school. The high school graduates of today who delayed their start in postsecondary education appear slightly better academically and behaviorally than those who enter the labor force directly. However, students who start two-year institutions immediately after high school appear slightly better than the delayed starts, while those who enter four-year institutions immediately after high school appear to have the most successful academic and behavioral profiles. Given the different characteristics of high school graduates in these four groups, what kinds of futures in college and labor market outcomes can they expect? Should we be encouraging students in high school to pursue more challenging courses and a wider variety of academic experiences with the expectation that fewer will enter the labor market directly after high school?

We also found that recent high school graduates who enter two-year postsecondary institutions are more likely than ever to aspire to bachelor's degrees. Yet, attending a two-year institution and subsequently transferring to a four-year institution and obtaining a bachelor's degree is a slow and improbable route (see Schneider & Stevenson, 1999). What should we be telling these young people about the schooling careers of students in two-year institutions? Should two-year institutions be more responsive to the needs of these educationally ambitious students who comprise the largest proportion of their freshmen classes (see Kojaku & Nuñez, 1999)? What role should two-year institutions take in counseling these students? Should there be "core curriculum" courses at two-year institutions? What articulated transfer agreements are needed between two- and four-year institutions? Most community colleges serve disproportionately minority populations. We find, however, that when family and academic background characteristics are controlled for, African American are four times more likely than whites to attend four-year institutions. Hispanics, on the other hand, are disproportionately more likely to attend two-year institutions. This raises the issue of what provisions two-year colleges are making for the specific minority populations they serve.

Our research also indicates that rigorous mathematics and science course-taking in high school is one of the strongest predictors of four-year college attendance and continuation. This is also the case for foreign language courses, although these benefits do not hold for advanced course-taking in other subjects such as history or humanities. Even

if there is an agreement that students should take more rigorous courses in math and science, what if any requirements should be made for students in other subjects? How does advanced course-taking in math, science, and other subjects ease the transition from high school and promote persistence in postsecondary school?

Given the emphasis the federal government has placed on encouraging all students to obtain at least fourteen years of education, we must ask where and how that education should occur. We need to continue to examine the returns to various levels of postsecondary degree attainment and vocational credentialing. What can we do for students who enter the labor force directly after high school, given that many of them will choose work in "teenage" jobs, such as the fast food industry or sales? The earnings gap between the higher educational "haves" and "have nots" has widened considerably in recent decades. The "college premium" refers to differences in relative wages earned by those with at least a bachelor's degree compared to those with other levels of education including a high school diploma, some college, and a graduate degree (see Murphy & Welch, 1989). Will the value of the "college premium" continue at the same rate for baccalaureate degree holders in the next decade? For what populations will the "college premium" be more beneficial?

These findings, as well as the questions they raise, we believe, could potentially inform the research agendas of a number of different disciplines. However, given the limited communication across academic disciplinary boundaries, information generated in one area is rarely quickly transmitted to another. Holding a conference where such communication would occur seemed a useful enterprise with the potential to enhance opportunities for cross-disciplinary research. Therefore, with the support of NSF, we designed such a meeting and invited a diverse group of scholars and policy makers to participate.

Thirty-four scholars, policymakers, and graduate students attended the meeting, and seventeen of them prepared remarks. As specified in the grant application, participants were mainly invited from NSF grantees engaged in work in related areas, scholars conducting research in higher education and economics, and policy experts within the federal government, including staff at NSF who work in the area of undergraduate education. Prior to the conference these participants received a briefing book that contained papers which

would serve as a template for the conference's guiding questions, which included:

1. Who is attending various types of postsecondary institutions or entering the labor market directly after high school?
2. What are the characteristics of successful college students in both two- and four-year institutions?
3. What can we expect the wage benefits to be for college graduates in the next millennium?
4. How can two- year and four-year institutions be more responsive to their changing populations?

The conference sessions were organized into four panel presentations followed by group discussions. Each panel included five to six scholars in the fields of adolescent or human development, anthropology, economics, education, and sociology. Participants in each panel responded to one of the main questions of the conference, drawing on their own work and related scholarship in the field. The final panel provided an opportunity for graduate students to address problems particularly relevant for generating new knowledge in their respective fields, as well as identify areas of inquiry that would be well-served by a multidisciplinary perspective.

This White Paper highlights current scholarship related to adolescent development and transitions to postsecondary education and the labor force, introduces some emerging issues identified by conference participants, and considers their implications for future research. It also provides additional insights not discussed at the conference by advocating new avenues for research, and calling attention to a number of themes not commonly examined from diverse perspectives and methodologies. Some of the major themes generated by the conference, our research findings, and preparation for this paper include:

- Existing longitudinal studies on transition issues need to be critically re-examined from an interdisciplinary framework to address new questions that have arisen as a result of rapid changes in both the educational system and labor market over the past two decades.

- Today's students show a considerable diversity of postsecondary attendance trajectories which include multi-institutional attendance, dual concurrent institutional enrollments, and school transfers across state lines. Future research must develop better methods for capturing these fluid educational careers and for understanding the ways that periods of employment may interrupt or overlap with periods of postsecondary attendance.

- Degree attainment appears to be a more relevant factor for predicting labor force participation and economic benefits than conventional family background characteristics, such as parents' education or family income. Future studies need to pay attention to the dynamic process of postsecondary continuation in two-year and four-year institutions and degree attainment over the life course.

- A more comprehensive understanding of the "college premium" requires moving beyond conventional human capital approaches and more explicitly including "social capital" perspectives. At the same time, the relationship between the quality of postsecondary educational experiences such as curricular programs, pedagogical techniques, and social supports and wage differences in the labor market should be investigated.

- A more complete understanding of factors that influence postsecondary outcomes for a changing college population requires analytic approaches that link macro-level conceptions of postsecondary institutional contexts to the more micro-level interpersonal processes that occur within those contexts.

Appendix A contains a list of individuals who participated in this conference, their institutional affiliations and contact information. Citations for the collection of papers included in the briefing book appear in Appendix B. Further information about this grant can be found at the National Science Foundation's web site for Transitions from Childhood to the Workforce (TCW) http://www.nsf.gov/sbe/tcw.

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