Mind the Gap: Connecting K–12 and Higher Education Educators to Improve the Student Experience

Each fall, over 7,000 recent high school graduates enroll in courses at The Ohio State University. With each incoming class comes a group of students with increasingly higher composite ACT/SAT scores and, unsurprisingly, increasingly higher expectations for an engaging, world-class education. As students transition from a high school to a college/university setting, the role of the teacher in their educational experience changes as well. In some cases, particularly at Ohio State, students step into a classroom comprising more students than were in their entire graduating high school class. Many students go from high school teacher to college professor with little preparation for this shift.

When we compare high school teachers and college professors, high school teachers typically have deep expertise in pedagogy, whereas college professors are more focused in their subject area. A newly hired college faculty member typically spends four to five years in a graduate research group and then follows that up with a research-intensive post-doc or two. Through this experience, each faculty member conducts countless hours of research and receives mentoring from not only an advisor but also collaborators in the specific field. Thus, most faculty at research institutions have an impressive background in research but are usually missing a solid teaching background. They have little to no teaching experience before they set foot in the classroom of their first teaching assignment. This deviates dramatically from the instruction that high school students receive from their certified and highly qualified teachers. Through their K–12 years, high school students receive instruction from teachers who have studied and been trained in instructional practices, education philosophy and theory, and implementations of practical pedagogical strategies, even though they may not have completed much more than a few introductory-level college/university courses or a bachelor’s degree in the content area they are teaching.

With such vastly different and equally important skill sets in the educational spectrum, it’s unfortunate that high school teachers and college professors do not collaborate more often. Strong collaborations would enhance instruction for both parties, would increase the understanding of what types of teaching and learning are happening in each setting, and would assist students in their transition from high school to college. The increasing popularity of MOOCs, open-education resources such as OpenStax College, and freely available course content on platforms such as iTunes U brings an incredible opportunity for high school teachers and college instructors to collaborate and enhance each other’s instruction.

Ohio State is leading one such project. College Ready Ohio seeks to provide K–12 teachers with college-level content and professional development related to digital pedagogy, the incorporation of mobile technology for teaching and learning, and digital content creation. Through a partnership between Ohio State, the Ohio STEM Learning Network, two regional Education Service Centers, and ten participating school districts across the state, College Ready Ohio aims to expand students’ access to—and increase the affordability of—higher education for Ohio’s students. By piloting dual enrollment, known as College Credit Plus in Ohio, for students in the partner districts, College Ready Ohio will help ease the financial burden of higher education by providing students with an opportunity to earn college credits in high school, while simultaneously preparing students for the rigor of college-level coursework.

Within the scope of the grant delivery, K–12 teachers from participating districts will spend two years working with Ohio State faculty and staff to hone their skills in teaching in their specific content areas by incorporating open-education resources from Ohio State faculty and by learning how to create and curate high-quality digital content into their high school courses. At the beginning of the third year of the project, this group of teachers will become catalysts within their districts and will lead the training of their colleagues. Embedded within the professional development component of the grant is the opportunity for participating K–12 teachers and Ohio State faculty to collaborate on teaching with mobile technology and digital content. Each student enrolled in a course taught by a catalyst teacher will receive an iPad in a 1:1 setting. As the collaboration cross-pollinates and expands, Ohio’s students will be the ultimate beneficiaries, becoming more prepared for the rigor of college course material, developing digital literacy and collaboration skills, and gaining college credits at no cost to their families.

Meanwhile, college faculty can share their insights with high school teachers on developments and trends within their respective fields and can drive applications for the threshold
of knowledge needed to perform well in a college classroom. At the same time, K–12 educators can share their insights with faculty on instructional design, teaching methods, the current landscape of learning in Ohio high schools, and the best way to develop meaningful assessment focused on evidence of student learning.

Students today have a seamless, integrated experience with everything they touch, from Amazon to iTunes. It will take some time, but we can all benefit from learning from each other, and ultimately, students will benefit as we create a more personalized and seamless transition from high school to college—a transition that also challenges each student in the areas needed. Technology not only allows this to happen but opens up the classroom for instructors to make the best use of their face-to-face student interactions that extend beyond traditional lectures. Through this unique collaboration, faculty in both K–12 and higher education institutions can continue to raise the student learning experience to new heights.

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