

Cross Case Study Report: P-16/20 Councils
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Prepared for
The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education

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Different Models; Same Goal

The three states profiled in the case studies provide useful contrasts in experience with, and approach to, the P-16/P-20 Council mechanism. Kentucky's is the oldest Council, having been formed by mutual agreement of K-12 and postsecondary education officials in 1999. Neither the governor nor the legislature has a formal role. The Councils in Arizona and Rhode Island were both created by executive order of their respective governors in 2005 but reflect vastly different gubernatorial visions. Arizona's P-20 Council has 40 members, including four members of the legislature and extensive representation from business, government, and the community. It is highly structured into committees and subcommittees and serves as a vehicle for generating broad-based recommendations to the governor. Rhode Island's PK-16 Council has only nine members, most of whom report directly to the governor. It functions more as an internal management tool by which the Governor coordinates his education officials and less as a means of generating outside information for consideration by those education officials. While neither Kentucky nor Rhode Island includes legislators as formal council members, legislators in Kentucky are engaged in council activities while Rhode Island's Council proceeds without buy-in by the legislature as a partner in educational policy making.

Aside from their obvious geographic differences in size and location, the three states provide variation in socio-economic conditions and thus in the nature of the educational challenges addressed by their respective councils. Kentucky is a historically lower-income state trying to raise educational achievement and engineer a transformation to a post-industrial economy. With a history of low educational attainment and ambitious reform efforts to improve education, the Council's primary task has been to pull together discrete reform efforts. Arizona is one of the fastest-growing states, trying to redesign educational systems to accommodate increasing numbers of Latino immigrants with less experience and success in the educational system. One of its council's notable challenges is to increase the college-going culture in the state. Rhode Island is a traditionally high-performing state on many educational measures that has begun to face some of the strains of diversification being felt for far longer in other parts of the country.

The National Center selected these states for in-depth study because of the conviction that their councils have engaged in substantive work to close the governance divide between K-12 and postsecondary education that we have documented in a previous report.¹ The case studies did indeed produce lessons that should prove useful to those interested in whether and how such councils can increase college readiness and success and help stem this nation's decline in educational attainment relative to many other nations in the global economy. This essay offers some of those lessons as the researchers have drawn them, but is not a detailed analysis of the differences among the three councils in terms of context, history, operation, and accomplishment. For that we encourage you to read the individual cases as they give a vivid account of each council's experience and collectively offer important lessons.

¹ *The Governance Divide*,

The three cases reveal the depth of the divide between the K-12 and postsecondary governance systems and the great difficulty states face in attempting to close it. There are daunting substantive and procedural barriers to using P-16/20 councils to reform policy in a way that remedies the problems of the governance divide. There are serious trade-offs to be faced in decisions about structure, influence, and sustainability. More hopefully, there are positive outcomes reported in each case and some conclusions that can be drawn for how councils might be most effective, despite the challenges they face.

Substantive Challenges – The Tall Order of Alignment

Substantively, there is a long agenda of tasks to accomplish to improve the alignment of these two historically divided educational bureaucracies. The three councils have each recognized that one – perhaps *the* – primary task is to develop standards for college readiness that are shared across the K-16 educational community and to use those standards to influence the high school and college curricula to yield a logical progression of coursework that prepares high school graduates for college success. Adding to this challenge is the awareness, in all three states, that workforce readiness of high school graduates is also a pressing concern that must be addressed through attention to readiness standards. In each of the states, these alignment efforts began with actions to increase the rigor of high school graduation requirements – efforts consistently cited as major accomplishments. Less successful, however, have been efforts to use those standards to align the curriculum *across* the divide – an accomplishment that requires far greater coordination than agreeing on requirements in one sector (high school).

All three states have struggled mightily over the issue of assessments. A key to a smooth transition of students across the divide is a set of instruments that can measure how well students have learned the material at each stage and can do so in a manner that feeds useful information back to educators and families so that corrective steps can be taken. But issues around assessment have become greatly politicized in all three states and seem to be confounded by a lack of full understanding of the appropriate uses of different kinds of assessments. For example, nationally-normed tests like the ACT, used widely in Kentucky, are well-suited to gauge how Kentucky students perform relative to students in other states – something favored by those who fear that local tests may use lower standards and mask a degree of relative under-performance in Kentucky. But ACT may not serve as well as end-of-course exams do to signal performance in courses whose curricula has been developed to match college readiness standards developed as a prior step to achieve alignment. ACT may be favored by selective colleges for admissions and placement but likely does not provide information about specific proficiency levels to help community colleges know where, in pre-collegiate course sequences, a student should be placed.

Rhode Island faces an additional challenge with assessment in its decision to incorporate the demonstration of proficiency in graduation requirements through portfolios and other non-standardized test approaches. This provision has not been well implemented because

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it requires a high level of sustained participation from external stakeholders, particularly, business, to set and evaluate workplace readiness proficiency.

Arizona faced a problem common across the country with respect to the use of standards-based assessments – that is, how much and how quickly should the results of such tests be made to have consequences for students in terms of promotion and graduation. Fierce political battles have been waged there, as elsewhere, between those who believe that students will be unfairly punished, not having had sufficient opportunity to reach such standards, and those who believe that delaying the use of such assessments will harm students by diverting attention from the need for states to improve educational outcomes.

Accomplishing the alignment agenda requires a high degree of cooperation that would be difficult under any circumstances. States, under the guidance of their P-16/20 councils, must (1) achieve agreement on college and workforce readiness standards, (2) adjust curriculum in high school, community college, and four year sectors to reflect those standards, and (3) adopt assessment practices that help students make up deficiencies while still in high school and help college with placement and admissions. But these councils must pursue that agenda along with other priorities such as increasing teacher quality, increasing teacher supply in high need fields, expanding dual enrollment, and increasing public awareness of the need to increase college going and college success. More difficult still, councils face huge procedural challenges because they lack authority over the existing governance structures that they seek to bridge. It is, therefore, not surprising that the councils have made more progress on certain individual pieces of the agenda such as increasing graduation requirements, improving teacher training, and expanding data collection than on the whole agenda of increasing K-16 alignment of standards, curriculum, and assessments.

Procedural Challenges – Theories of Change in the Absence of Authority

While quite different in historical context, structure, and operation, all three councils are alike in their lack of authority to implement educational policy. The key procedural challenge facing the P-16 councils mechanism in general is that it is overlaid on existing governance structures that no one wants to replace. The three states we studied each took a different approach to dealing with the authority conundrum. These approaches may be characterized as theories of change for how state policy might be affected in the absence of direct policy-making authority.

In Kentucky the Council operates outside of the formal legislative and executive branches of government – including no representatives from either among its members. It is a voluntary association of state agencies brought together under the chief auspices of the Council for Postsecondary Education to inform one another's work. The Council does not take policy positions or work as a body to implement policies. Its implicit theory of change has two parts. First, it is assumed that the council will produce a whole greater than the sum of the parts by providing a forum for different state agencies to see a bigger picture and modify their independent agendas accordingly, for the better. Second, the

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Kentucky model depends on a network of 22 regional councils. The absence of authority, funding, and staffing for the state-level council is not seen as a major barrier to progress since the regional councils are envisioned to do much of the real work of P-16 reform at the local level. The first part of the theory appears sound as most observers have seen evidence that cooperation among the constituent agencies has influenced their policy priorities. The regional approach, however, does not appear to have as much potential to influence policy. Few regional councils have acquired the resources to attain the capacity to do much. But more importantly, the independent actions of regions has not produced statewide consensus on policy priorities or anything resembling a policy agenda.

The Rhode Island PK-16 Council does enjoy a certain basis in law as it was set up by an executive order of the Governor. But owing to a complex and heated struggle between the legislative and executive branches of government that also reflects a partisan divide, the council has no legislative support. Worse, it suffers from legislative hostility that pronounces any would-be policy initiative of the council “dead on arrival.” Whether a cause or consequence of this situation, the Governor set up the council to function as a management tool for his administration – in effect as an education cabinet. The implied theory of change here is that a top down model by which the Governor can coordinate the executive branch offices that influence the education and workforce policy agendas will achieve better coordination and better results. Since it operates largely as a management structure, the council *per se* has little formal communication with outside stakeholders. This model encounters greater barriers to policy development than the Kentucky model because, absent legislative buy-in, the Governor and his lieutenants are limited to working within existing policy constraints. To the extent that the legislature pursues policy reforms, it does so on its own track, with little regard for the Council’s agenda.

Of the three, the Arizona P-20 Council seems to have the most potential to influence state policy. The structure and functioning of the council is based on the idea that an expanded conversation about educational performance and needs among a broad set of stakeholders can yield policy change. Two points are critical to understanding the policy potential of the council. First, while in Kentucky and Rhode Island the driving force behind the formation of the council was (and is) the higher education bureaucracy and the Governor, respectively, in Arizona it was unquestionably the business community. Those players encouraged a model under which many stakeholders come to the table to bring pressure to bear on an education bureaucracy known for its ability to resist reform. Second, this expanded stakeholder group was granted legitimacy by the Governor, who issued an executive order and allocated staffing and resources from her office that far out-pace the resources available to the other two councils we studied. The result is a council that can sustain a coordinated policy agenda and for which there is a high degree of public accountability, since there are large, open meetings, published agendas, and expectations for follow up by participants.

Structure, Influence, and Sustainability: Trade-offs

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In all three states, questions of sustainability of the council loom large but in different ways.

In Rhode Island sustainability is threatened mostly by the council's strong identification with the Governor. It is viewed as his tool for implementing his vision – both a management and a policy vision. There is little chance that the hostile legislature would act to put the council in statute, thereby leaving the fate of the Council to the priorities of the next governor. An incoming governor would likely need to restructure the council to incorporate more voices if it is to have a good chance of surviving and having an influence on policy.

In Kentucky, by contrast, sustainability is threatened by the lack of connection of the council to any political figure. Sustainability is threatened as well by the perception of its limited impact, particularly within the business community which sees the council as having failed to effectively coordinate the pieces of the reform agenda. There is thus the prospect of a trade-off between influence and longevity. The Kentucky council is notably one of the oldest in the nation – perhaps, according to some observers, because it has stayed on the sidelines in some hot disputes and been a forum for discussion as opposed to policy development. The Kentucky Chamber is leading an effort to strengthen the council so that it would be more effective in the policy domain. The challenge will be to increase its effectiveness without increasing opposition to its work.

In Arizona, the council's future is also tied to the future of the Governor, who, since the case study was performed, has been appointed to a post in the Obama Administration. But there is more hope in Arizona that the council will continue in some form because of the widespread involvement by business, the legislature, representatives from local schools, and the greater community.

In all three states the sustainability question arises from the key conundrum: councils have no statutory authority over existing educational bureaucracies but no one supports giving them such authority. No one wants to create what some call a “super agency” or a “super board.” One person we interviewed called this prospect “a train wreck” and others noted such a model would not be workable given the role and authority of existing structures. Yet there is no discussion of *replacing* existing structures with a unified K-16 governance body. So the question in all three states becomes: what structure and basis in law (or outside of government) offers the best chance for a council to survive and to influence the policy agendas of existing government offices and agencies that influence college and workforce readiness and postsecondary success?

Conclusion – Toward a Sustainable Council Mechanism to Influence Policy

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In each of the three states studies, the P-16/20 councils have made valuable contributions to the dialog around college readiness and success. They have done so by providing a forum for various parties to come together to share information and gain a greater appreciation of multiple perspectives. Each council can claim a set of accomplishments that have added value to outcomes that might have occurred in the absence of the council. But as the National Center concluded in its report *Claiming Common Ground*, fundamental changes in state policy will be required to transform systems of education that were designed for a bygone era.² The three councils we studied have, for the most part, struggled to be the vehicle that can promote a state-level policy agenda.

As these states, and others, work to enhance the value of their P-16/20 councils, the chief objective should be to give the council the capacity to develop a policy agenda and push for its implementation. Councils are no doubt constrained by being overlaid on existing governance structures. But there appears to be no structural reason why a council cannot be charged with developing and promoting a collective P-16 policy agenda. In none of the three cases we studied did the council take on this role. Instead, the existing state entities pursued their own, independent policy agendas – shaped, one would hope, by the broader discussions but nonetheless pursued independently. Councils would be more effective if they carried a unified agenda to the legislature and advocated collectively for its enactment. Such collective, coordinated action would seem to go far in alleviating the criticism that the lack of statutory authority limits what councils can accomplish.

Councils could also be more effective if they operated with more public accountability – something that could be accomplished even without more formal statutory authority. The Arizona council provides the best lesson here. The breadth of public involvement and the openness in which that council operates provides de facto accountability in generating a public record of actions to which each agency has committed. The Kentucky case provides the counterpoint because it is a voluntary association that was not charged with making recommendations to any public official. The best approach, given the overall governance constraints, appears to be some official charge – be it by executive order or in statute – for a council to generate a policy agenda, recommend it to the Governor and/or the legislature, and advocate collectively on its behalf.

The challenge facing states more generally is to place state interests, not institutional interests, at the center of the policy agenda. Again, Arizona provides a key lesson in this regard by inviting such a large, broad base of participants into the council. The business interests, in particular, have been credited with keeping the economic interests of the state at the heart of the reform agenda. But doing so has required an inordinate commitment of time and resources to the council that has been absent in other states.

In sum, these case studies suggest that closing the governance divide is not easy – certainly not unless or until fundamentally new governance structures are devised. Short of that, the cases suggest that the P-16/20 council mechanism has the potential to influence policy reform aimed at closing the divide. To realize that potential, careful thought must be given to designing a structure that grants councils the authority to

² *Claiming Common Ground...*

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develop a unified policy agenda, the responsibility to recommend and advocate for that agenda in a publicly accountable manner, and the resources to sustain a broad base of participation in the council that can ensure that conversations, and resulting policy agendas, are shaped by the needs and priorities of the state.