

## **Striving toward the promise of P-16 reform: Political, organizational, and leadership challenges**

By: Stefani Thachik and [Katherine Cumings Mansfield](#)

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## Striving Toward the Promise of P-16 Reform: Political, Organizational, and Leadership Challenges

<sup>1</sup>Stefani Thachik and <sup>2</sup>Katherine Cumings Mansfield

### Abstract

This article examines the development and implementation of P-16 education reform in Texas and aims to understand leadership meaning-making at state and local levels. Findings suggest goal attainment and sustainability varied statewide according to how political actors defined problems and solutions, the type of and extent to which human and financial resources were deployed, and how local actors designed and employed these unique organizational structures. A comparison of both surviving and thriving P-16 governance councils leads to recommendations to better align educational systems across the U.S., improve student achievement, and bolster educational attainment across the preschool to postsecondary pipeline.

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<sup>1</sup>Dr. Stefani Thachik is the Assistant Director of the Business Honors Program at The University of North Carolina at Charlotte. She earned her Ph.D. in Educational Leadership at Virginia Commonwealth University's School of Education. Her research interests include investigating the sociocultural contexts of educational policy and practice, as well as how connecting the K-12 and higher education sectors might result in better outcomes for underrepresented students. Thachik has presented her research at major conferences, including the American Educational Research Association and the University Council for Educational Administration. Her work has also appeared in *Education Policy Analysis Archives* and *Education & Urban Society*.

<sup>2</sup>Dr. Katherine Cumings Mansfield is an Associate Professor at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro in the Department of Educational Leadership and Cultural Foundations. Mansfield graduated from The University of Texas at Austin with a Ph.D. in Educational Policy and Planning and a doctoral portfolio in Women's and Gender Studies. Mansfield's scholarship examines educational leadership, policy, and practice as it relates to identity intersectionalities such as gender, class, and race across P-16 contexts. Mansfield has published in a variety of venues, including: *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, *Educational Studies*, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, and *Teachers College Record*.

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### **Striving Toward the Promise of P-16 Reform: Political, Organizational, and Leadership Challenges**

The ideas of alignment and collaboration from preschool (P) through college graduation (16), have reemerged in national discussions as college and career readiness has become a major issue in education reform (Blume & Zumeta, 2013; Harnisch & Lebioda, 2016). No longer can K-12 and higher education afford to operate in silos as the U.S. faces several economic and labor issues, including the need for a more educated workforce and the pending retirement of the baby boomer generation (Rochford, 2007). Yet, K-12 and higher education continue to operate under separate governance and funding systems, so “external leadership is almost always required to bring the two sectors together” (Mokher, 2010, p. 478) with P-16 councils often taking on that role.

The P-16 movement became a formalized practice with the creation of the first P-16 leadership council in Georgia in 1995. These leadership councils can be described as formalized groups of community representatives working toward P-16 goals and often include leaders from early childhood (PK), K-12 and higher education, local and state governments, and the private sector (Lawson, 2010, p. 53). By 2008, 46 states had some form of P-16 council (Education Commission of the States, 2013; Lawson, 2010; Rippner, 2014).

While considered a relatively new educational reform strategy, P-16 actually reflects the voices of political actors from the prior century that still echo today (Kettlewell, Kaste, & Jones, 2000; Mansfield & Thachik, 2016). For example, the funding of the federal TRiO programs, under the auspices of The Higher Education Act in 1965, were seen as solutions for increasing educational attainment for citizens from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Fenske, Geranios, Kellar & Moore, 1997). Fifteen years later, *A Nation at Risk* created a sense of urgency around restructuring the educational system to make the United States more globally competitive (Mansfield & Thachik, 2016). Despite the fast growth of P-16 councils across the United States in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, Rippner (2014) reports a decrease in the number and restructuring of these state councils in more recent years.

The quick evolution of the P-16 movement led to an abundance of research summarizing the formation and development of leadership councils, but few studies have focused on the infrastructure and effectiveness of these organizations over a long-term period (Edmondson & Zimpher, 2014; Mokher, 2008). More recently, Perna and Armijo (2014) analyzed ten states’ P-16 councils finding their often typical *advisory* nature was frequently a barrier to sustained change. Over time, these councils shifted the discourse to stressing the importance of collaboration across sectors. Meanwhile, Rippner (2014, 2015) addressed the reduction in state-level councils by studying three state-level councils in Georgia, Illinois, and Minnesota. Rippner found the decline due to barriers such as lack of space, staff, and leadership turnover (2014). The current study adds to prior research by examining the interplay between local and state level actors within Texas and comparing active and defunct councils.

The purpose of the current study is to examine the policy development and implementation of the P-16 reform movement in Texas, as well as to understand leadership meaning-making at state and local levels. Texas is often identified as one of the first states leading the movement, especially in terms of their data and accountability systems, two common P-16 enterprises (Durand, 2011). As McDonnell and Weatherford (2016) point out, most P-16 studies focus on policy interventions in terms of top-down mandates, emphasizing policy development from higher levels of government. However, less is known about the meaning-making of educational leaders charged with policy interpretation and intervention implementation. This investigation is unique in that it uses interpretive policy analysis to examine the steady but shifting terrain of P-16 educational reform. It also provides a starting point for critical conversations among education, business, government, and community leaders about the potential of collaboration across interest groups to address educational equity issues and the future of the P-16 movement. The present focus on interpretation and implementation of both state and local P-16 councils fills gaps in past research, which, while helpful, has been limited to descriptions rather than analyses and usually focused on just the state level (Perna & Armijo, 2014). Moreover, forefronting the voices

of those most directly involved with the movement adds to our understanding of the promises and pitfalls of P-16 councils in Texas and goes beyond descriptive case study in order to learn from diverse leadership perspectives invested in the reform effort. Thus, our investigation into the development and interpretation of the P-16 movement, its governance structures, and the meaning-making of local and state actors is a timely example of the interplay of politics, educational research, and social analysis. Studying the collective approach of P-16 governance structures on education could address large-scale social change in other arenas since: "Social problems arise from the interplay of government and commercial activities, not only from the behavior of social sector organizations" (Kania & Kramer, 2011, p. 39).

We begin by explaining the methodological and theoretical frameworks used to conduct this qualitative study. Findings are then shared focusing on key stakeholders who helped shape the P-16 movement as it currently stands. We conclude with implications and lessons learned for the future of the P-16 movement as the movement continues to mutate and expand across the country, albeit utilizing a variety of interchangeable terms such as "college and career readiness," "P-16," "P-20," and "Cradle to Career," for example. The juxtaposition of several surviving and thriving P-16 governance councils in Texas leads to recommendations that have potential to improve goal attainment and sustainability of the burgeoning P-16 movement across the U.S.

### **Theory and Methods**

Before explaining our interpretive approach, we would like to trouble over what we mean by "policy" as it can be difficult to define; and "so many people claim to have little or no understanding of policy... Others maintain that it has only minor relevance to their work – or, for that matter, their lives" (Torjman, 2005, p. 1). The dictionary defines policy as a course or principle of action adopted or proposed by a government, party, business, or individual. Harold Lasswell (1958) communicates this idea by positing that politics is the process of deciding who gets what, how much, and why. Rochefort and Cobb (1994) would agree, adding that policy is "a series of conclusions, choices, and rejections of alternatives..." (p. 7).

Developing and implementing policy is often portrayed as consisting of processes and products that are objective and neutral (Fischer, 2003; Rochefort & Cobb, 1994). However, scholars have recognized that policymaking processes and artifacts are influenced by ideologies and contextual complexities (Diem, et al., 2014; Fischer, 2003; Lugg & Murphy, 2014; Mansfield, 2013, 2016; Mansfield, Welton, & Grogan, 2014, Spring, 2011). The individual interpretation of written and oral policy discourses influence how policy is "read" and implemented (Brewer, 2013; Mansfield, 2013; Yanow, 2000). All of our actions have intentions: "We are meaning-making creatures. Our institutions, our policies, our language, our ceremonies are human creations, not objects independent of us (Yanow, 2014). As such, interpretive policy analysts recognize the meaning-making that goes into policy development and implementation, and thus, often use a constructivist approach to studying policy (Brewer, 2013; Mansfield, 2013, 2016; Werts & Brewer, 2015). That is, their work is guided by the belief that knowledge and meaning-making is co-constructed by policy actors relating to each other and the policy artifacts at hand (Yanow, 2000).

Interpretive frameworks uncover how meaning-making evolves from stakeholders' values and feelings: "Each time we engage, invoke, or use [a policy] artifact, we reinforce, maintain, or change its underlying meaning(s)" (Yanow, 2000, p. 15). Our thinking also aligns with Werts and Brewer (2015) who contend that studying stakeholders' role as implementer helps us to better understand the ways on-the-ground policy actors participate in democratic politics when they "question, reconfigure, adapt, accept, or reject the instructions and desires of more centralized policy makers" (p. 210). By searching for contrasts between what policies say versus what they actually do, one can seek the "truth of policy [and thereby political] intent" (Yanow, 2000, p. 9). Taking an interpretive approach also has potential to reveal whose voices are or are not represented in the political process (Rochefort & Cobb, 1994).

### Methods and Data Sources

Following Yanow's (2000) framework, we first established historical context by conducting an in-depth literature review. Texas was then chosen as a case site due to being an early leader in the movement and the subsequent replication of many of its initiatives across the nation (Mansfield & Thachik, 2016). For example, Texas was among the first states to adopt a longitudinal data system and establish accountability standards (Burley, 2007). So, the use of the case study approach (Merriam, 2009) allowed us to take into consideration both the incremental change and long-term stability of the P-16 movement within the state (Howlett & Cashore, 2014).

We identified what Yanow (2000) refers to as policy *artifacts* including legal documents, websites, newspaper articles, evaluation reports and meeting minutes that translate the law into practice. Conducting a document analysis provided additional context for the P-16 movement and evidence of how the movement has shifted over time. Readings of these documents and website pages led to the identification of what Yanow (2000) refers to as *communities of meaning* or interpretive communities. That is, individuals and groups who band together over a policy issue notwithstanding the policy in question may be the only thing they have in common. According to Yanow, these interpretive communities often have additional things in common such as careers and geographic location.

Participants were contacted initially through a P-16 listserv to participate in the study. Purposeful and snowball sampling (Henry, 1990; Mertens & Wilson, 2012) were used to further identify P-16 council leaders from both regional and state P-16 councils as well as non-governmental P-16 organizations for interviews to provide individual perspectives and policy contexts. The following research questions guided our investigation:

1. What socio-cultural factors contributed to the establishment of P-16 councils in Texas?
2. How did the politics and meaning-making of leaders develop as P-16 councils evolved over time?
3. How do state and local actors interact (or not) to reach P-16 goals?
4. What factors influence successful P-16 councils?

A pilot study was conducted to test the semi-structured interview protocol. As a result, the protocol was adjusted to clarify questions. Using the updated protocol, we conducted semi-structured interviews with a total of 21 participants identified as important P-16 stakeholders and political actors (Table 1).

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Characteristic	Number of Participants
Leadership Level	
State	4
Local	17
P-16 Council Formally Recognized by State	
Yes	9
No	8
Not Applicable	4
Region of State	
East Texas	3
North Texas	5
West Texas	1
South Texas	4
Southeast Texas	1
Central Texas	1
Statewide	6
Gender	
Female	12
Male	9

The interviews ranged from one half-hour to one hour and included questions designed to elicit perceptions concerning how stakeholders defined problems and solutions and made sense of the factors that worked toward goal attainment and sustainability of their particular iteration of the P-16 movement.

Each of the interviews were transcribed and coded using a step-by-step open coding process outlined by Merriam (2009) to identify themes related to the research questions. A random sample of four of the transcriptions were further reviewed by two additional researchers for code checking (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The study was intensive and long-term allowing for the collection of rich data that countered bias and provided additional support for conclusions (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). Similar to O’Laughlin and Lindle’s (2015) vertical discourse analysis approach, participants’ meaning-making was compared to the discourses that emerged while analyzing written discourse and points of agreement and conflict were identified.

The framing of the resulting narrative takes advantage of Kingdon’s (1984) policy streams framework, specifically focusing on how problems are recognized and defined, how policy proposals are refined, and how political actors organize themselves and take advantage of available resources. As a result, the limited and episodic nature of this particular educational reform is given meaning and areas requiring flexibility to enhance relevancy are identified (Sharp, 1994).

### Findings

Findings suggest goal attainment and sustainability across the state varied according to how political actors defined problems and solutions, the type of and extent to which human and financial resources were deployed, and how local actors designed and employed governance structures. Findings are presented in three major categories that emphasize those areas.

#### Problem Definition

The P-16 reform movement is supported by the idea that multiple factors influence an individual throughout their educational career; thus, there is a need to create an integrated approach to education from preschool through college graduation (Núñez & Oliva, 2009; Lawson, 2010). First, Texas established a state P-16 council to create one overarching system. Regional and local P-16 councils were created later under section §61.0762 in order to help meet the goals set forth in the state’s higher education plan, *Closing the Gaps 2000* (Loredo, 2009). This top-down creation of local councils led to parallel problem definitions from participants, despite disparate contexts that include sizeable rural regions and six of the largest metros in the United States (Perna & Finney, 2014). Overall, defining P-16 reform centered on four interrelated areas: 1) The need to integrate and align services across elementary education, secondary education, and higher education; 2) The imperative to strengthen the economy via college and career readiness; 3) The need to adapt institutional cultures to reflect changing demographic and program emphases, and; 4) The importance of identifying distractions associated with defining the parameters or coverage of reform efforts.

**Educational silos are outmoded.** Participants agreed that both K-12 and higher education systems could no longer survive by operating in silos, but rather, should align their resources and services. In several cases, participants noted that the increased recognition of the disconnect between the two systems led to finger-pointing early-on within the councils. One participant shared:

...in our area at least there was a vicious cycle of the colleges complaining... all these college people complaining about kids coming into college not ready, or not as prepared, or they’re not as well-educated as they used to be. This is what I hear. And then what I learned after going into this work was the high school people saying, “Well it’s not our fault. The kids are coming to us ill-prepared from grade school and middle school and then the lower people saying, “Well the kids are not entering school ready to learn and so that must be the parent’s fault.” And then the parents are saying “Wait a minute, the

teachers that are in our schools are coming from the colleges. Are the colleges not preparing teachers to be good teachers?"

The finger-pointing resulted in a passing of the blame from one institution to the next. So, while one of the purposes of the movement was to create communication and cooperation across education sectors, the reality was that individual actors still operated as if they were protecting one particular silo.

**College readiness leads to economic competitiveness.** When asked to define the problem in both their region and state that led to the creation of local and state P-16 councils, a majority of participants cited the need to promote college and career readiness. The prevailing belief was that high school was no longer viewed as a viable endpoint to survive in the new Texas economy, which included a rapidly growing high-tech and industry base. This shift in employment sectors, pointing to a need for better college and career readiness, was also conjoined with discussions about recapturing the state's economic competitiveness:

How do you talk about we're the number one economic development state in the country, which we are, and everybody wants to be like Texas? Everybody wants to move to Texas because that's where economic growth and prosperity are occurring. How do you, this is of course, a question that no one has been able to answer, but is somewhat rhetorical as well, but: "How do you sustain and maintain that leadership role if you're not providing a pipeline of qualified educated workers? For the Texas of the future? And the jobs of the future?"

Two participants recognized that within their southern regions of the state, this early push for college and career readiness often promoted four-year institutions over two-year institutions. As a result, their councils redefined college and career readiness to also include workforce development and readiness. While these two participants saw P-16 councils as reinforcing the mindset of success defined as a bachelor's degree; these participants believed the problem was not unique to southern constituencies:

I'm old enough that my parents came out of World War II and they were all farmers. They came back to these cities growing up and they had to make that adjustment and they all had low level blue collar jobs and they all said "I want my kid to go to college so they won't have to sweat" or "my kid won't have to work like this" and over this last 60 years, we've developed a culture of "you've got to go to college to be anybody" and now... we've given up respect for people who work with their hands –cabinet makers and artisans [and] various kinds of craftsmen don't exist anymore... So if we can, what we have to do is...understand that the world is changing and that it's not changing for the worse, but it's not dishonorable to have an AA degree or a certificate, especially if you're wanting to make money, because there's money to be made in those mid-skills jobs, but the whole community has got to learn about that or it's not going to work.

Thus, while participants noted the importance of community colleges and other training opportunities as beneficial to individual students and a viable means to realize consumer demand, formal policy documents and actors rarely placed the spotlight on two-year degrees or other valuable job skills training.

**Demographic and cultural shifts.** In order create a postsecondary culture, P-16 leaders also had to address the drastically shifting demographics of the state whilst Texas became majority-minority. Participants recognized the need to target the movement at subgroup populations, specifically mentioning African-American, Hispanic, low socioeconomic, and immigrant students. Population growth and varying demographics among regions contributed to the lack of resources available to support the P-16 movement, especially in terms of providing adequate services for the number of people wanting and needing them according to specific contexts:

So when you think about sort of that pipeline what we have is that one, our students of color are disproportionately affected. They are not achieving at rates of their white peers

and are not achieving at rates of their more wealthy peers. So I mean, think about it from that perspective – there is really a resource gap. They’re not getting the kind of resources [they need], be it access to high quality pre-K, teachers to staff those classrooms; and everywhere down that line, they are not getting what they need. So if we think about it on a real macro scale, those are the real things that are really hurting us and then when you start to peek past that, what you find is that what if tomorrow all those kids show up at pre-K? Well, there wouldn’t be room for them and if there were, there wouldn’t be teachers for them. So they need to sort of go down the pipeline of why and really start to look at where things are off.

Effective implementation was also a cause for concern. Shifting contexts included a growing population of young people that were less educated, poorer, and more likely to come from single parent homes (Bracco, 1997; Mansfield & Thachik, 2016). A *one size fits all* or conventional approach to learning and addressing educational issues no longer worked. While most P-16 leaders understood the importance of learning about and working with this emerging population, it was difficult to accomplish without having all sectors of the educational pipeline involved. As one participant leading an urban council pointed out, traditional approaches no longer addressed the core issues facing diverse subgroup populations of students:

...That’s one of the biggest problems we have is that our colleges and universities are turning out teachers- they will tell you this- that are prepared for a certain type of child in school, but these students have different needs and backgrounds.

While participants cited educator unpreparedness as a general problem, participants did not point out specifics such as the need for cultural competence training. For example, participants did not refer to research indicating that differences between teachers in the dominant culture and students from minoritized cultures were not always addressed in preparation programs; or, if they were, they did not go far enough. There was a lack of discourse concerning what researchers have found: that being a student from different cultural backgrounds than one’s teacher places many children at a disadvantage due to cultural biases of educators (Cousik, 2015, p. 57).

Another issue rarely discussed was the increasing number of students who are from families whose parents have never attended college. First generation college students often face additional barriers progressing through the educational pipeline including a lack of informational resources on the college experience. Applying and succeeding in college can seem daunting to those unfamiliar with the process, as the forms, deadlines, and even terminology need to be learned. This apparent gap in knowledge or recognition might be considered a breakdown of the system that is contributing to “leaks” in the P-16 pipeline. Not labeling the situation as part of the problem seriously constrains the theory of action behind P-16 reform.

**“What’s in a name?”** A major difference in how participants defined the problem related to the range of the pipeline covered by the council. In most cases, the regional councils defined themselves as *P-16*, as they focus on the preschool years through graduating college with a four-year degree. Other councils have altered their names to reflect their shifting conceptions of the problem and foci for solutions. For example, the shifting definition of *pipeline* often encompasses the full human development spectrum, going by names such as *Cradle to Career* or *P-20*. In one case, the preferred name change was traced back to the inclusion of the workforce in the council:

...So in my region the issue is how do we ensure that every child graduates to become a successful and happy adult. And how do we support those adults through their whole life spectrum? Because we don’t see this as a problem that ends at 16 or 20. It’s a lifelong learning issue having to provide local support for people throughout their life.

Another leader of a local state-recognized council cited the name change due to the perception that P-16 councils were being viewed poorly by communities for their lack of action. Even at the state level, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board recently renamed the Office of P-16 Initiatives to the Division of College Readiness and Success (THECB, 2016).

Finally, one participant acknowledged that the controversy about defining the exact parameters of the reform movement was distracting policy actors from the true problem at hand:

When I talk about the state agencies and their work I often think of a little cartoon that demonstrates three guys in a boat and there's a hole in one side of the boat. And one side is feverishly trying to get the water out of the boat and the other two guys are sitting on the other side of the boat saying, "Glad the hole is not on our side!" But it's all sinking too... This is about how do we create an educated population that can reinforce and support our economy, that can support the type of work, of cultural and social issues that we want to support as a community that we feel are important to us. And that we know are strong K-12 systems that prepare students, gives them the knowledge and skills, gives them the love for learning that they will take on for the rest of their lives. We know that some form of postsecondary education, whether it be an industry certification, an associate's degree, whether it be a baccalaureate degree or higher, are necessary in meeting the demands of a thriving workforce that has a great diversity in terms of what the labor market is demanding.

### Identifying Policy Solutions

Due to the diverse perspectives in defining the problem, and because of the wide spanning issues P-16 reform seeks to address, the movement usually encompasses a collection of coordinated and/or muddled reform efforts (Durand, 2011). As such, councils vary in their selection, prioritization, and development of initiatives based on state and local context and needs. In Texas, these policy solutions commonly included: 1) Collaboration and networking; 2) Data sharing; 3) Providing direct services, and; 4) Changing macro systems.

**Collaboration and networking.** In an effort to create a seamless pathway for students, all participants spoke broadly of collaboration and networking as one of the first steps to solving the problem. Participants said the creation of the councils helped encourage leaders of local institutions to discuss shared issues despite working in different organizations. Previous to implementing the new reform efforts, many of the different entities did not cross paths. The implementation of P-16 councils bridged communications prompting more face-to-face time between stakeholders. As one participant, who worked with multiple P-16 councils at the local and state level, noted, the new councils helped leaders in K-12, higher education, and businesses realize all three sectors "are so inexplicitly linked that you cannot bring about huge changes in one, which is what they aspire to, without bringing about huge changes in the other." Instead of each entity pursuing their own mission, priorities, and policy solutions, collaborating in the P-16 movement better facilitates combining resources to reach desired outcomes. A leader of a state-wide P-16 organization remarked,

That is *huge* because for so many urban districts –and I don't think this is different for suburban or rural districts– we don't always have everybody facing in the right direction, in the same direction. So that, to me, the work that is taking place around cradle to career, and getting some agreement on what the common goals are, and then secondly, building on what seems to be currently working in these communities now.

Thus, the importance of shared goals and resources were considered by some to be a residual, but significant, benefit of these new opportunities for collaboration and networking.

**Data sharing.** This emphasis on collaboration as an essential starting point to developing the P-16 council is difficult to quantify. Participants felt there were ways (or needed to be ways) to show evidence of the council's accomplishments, although, not all participants subscribed to a data-driven approach. One local leader remarked that councils have to decide whether they are going to be outcome-driven or an educational group that passes along information to a variety of people and organizations.

In addition to defining purposes for and types of data collection, some participants noted the importance to share whatever data *is* collected. The perception was that sharing data about best practices and lessons learned was essential for P-16 councils to direct the work and serves as the

catalyst for increased collaboration. By looking at data together, groups could pinpoint key problem areas for which councils should focus. It also provided evidence to help frame difficult conversations, such as issues faced by underrepresented student subgroups. A male participant shared his council's approach:

The other thing we do is we disaggregate data. The way we do that is to look at different subgroups of kids based on their ethnicity or their economic situation or you know, males and females and all kinds of things, because some of the programs work for some kids, but they don't work for all kids. So we've been specifically working on disaggregated data to close the gaps in certain areas. A lot of people get very uncomfortable talking about that because we're a majority-minority state. You think that all the programs the schools put together work with that in mind, but they don't necessarily do.

Other strategies for sharing data included presentations and workshops to help key leadership in studying the data to learn about their community's issues. Another participant emphasized that while data sharing is important, councils also needed to be clear on specific contextual complexities to help understand the data:

So, we had data brought to the table and were like, "Oh, our schools are horrible." So, I was like, "Let's look at the state of demographics." It's getting them to understand the context of their data and then the next thing would be getting the school people and the business people on the same page, which we're not.

Most participants cited multiple sources for the data utilized, including local, district, and state level data. Each of these levels may collect different pieces of information, utilize different measurements, or provide data on a dissimilar timeframe leaving councils to decipher how to best utilize the data to fit their needs. While the previous participant found their school people and business people on different pages in interpreting the data, another participant found data to be an area where the business sector could really contribute to the council, "We're bringing in better data systems. That's kind of driven by the business community;" while a third participant cited their council's use of the business practice of continuous improvement. Several participants observed that data sharing is a strong policy solution as it is difficult to ignore or argue *the data*.

**Providing direct services.** Participants also shared examples of direct services P-16 councils are developing, or have already implemented, that they believe will work, or are working, to meet their objectives. Since "the problem of college and career readiness" encompasses such a wide spectrum of issues each council needed to prioritize and strategize, focusing on a limited area of the P-16 pipeline depending on a number of factors, including their perceived regional needs, availability of resources, and the practicality of each intervention under consideration. One participant involved in a direct service council stressed,

At the end of the day, we've got to *focus*; no one has the staff or the organizational capacity where they can really align the community across all these different outcomes and all these different metrics. It can dilute the work.

Policy interventions included: promoting dual credit programs, aligning curriculum from high school to postsecondary credentials, marketing campaigns for parents, delivering professional development for teachers, and providing career days. Participants felt these strategies could be implemented in a short time frame, especially with grant funding. One participant referred to this approach as a "piecemeal approach," but pointed out that councils must begin to tackle pipeline concerns one small issue at a time with the hope that interventions can eventually be scaled up.

**Changing macro systems.** In addition to offering direct services, leaders also shared the importance of focusing on larger systemic issues to achieve lasting change. These policy solutions are more long-term and focus on macro system changes rather than micro services. As one participant said, "I think one thing to keep in mind about the cradle to career movement is that it's really about trying to attack systemic change, which, quite honestly, takes time." Another participant pointed out that relying on micro changes, such as direct services, is just not enough:

“What can sometimes happen is people try to create programs on top of programs, on top of programs. What we want to work for is how we can create more systemic change?” Indeed, as another participant pointed out, the solutions to the P-16 problem are not always located within the school day, but also include issues of healthcare, economics, transportation, housing, social supports, and food scarcity. In many cases, these educators are already crossing paths at various meetings and conferences, which could potentially lead to additional public sector representation and eventually stimulate additional supports for students served within the movement.

Councils reported varying success in tackling such a large systemic problem. Compounding variables, such as the multiple features influencing a student’s life course, has made it difficult to measure progress. In addition, varying regional contexts has made scaling up extraordinarily difficult:

... As you move to different cities and you see different cradle to career groups, they all kind of have a different approach. They will all be a product of their community, so whatever that means- whether they’re in a district that’s very large, very small, very unified or otherwise, right? And you’ll find that those qualities have an effect on how they operate, how they organize. Even if the core tenants are the same, you’ll find some distinctions in how they do their work...No matter how you do this, you’re dealing with a very large, very complex system and a large set of uncoordinated actors in a world of misalignment, so it’s all the makings of a change movement that’s not supposed to work. So from that perspective we’re always fighting an uphill battle.

While participants recognized the need for both short- and long-term goals, pressure from policymakers often dictated whether councils focused on the micro or the macro. As one participant summed up, “I would say the legislature wants to see immediacy, because they had pulled a lot of funding from higher education in 2007-2008 and again in 2011. That hurt a lot.”

### **Governance Structures**

In Texas, the P-16 movement is viewed as a top-down movement with the creation of a state council, which eventually led to the development of regional councils to help with implementation and local issues. In some areas, regional councils are further broken down into smaller, local councils. While the state provided guidelines for P-16 councils to obtain state recognition, locals had a say in the organization of their councils and the structure of their membership, enabling them to adapt according to perceived needs. According to one participant,

When we started we did not have a leadership commission. We didn’t have a presiding officer, so it’s really kind of taken shape since then. We’ve strengthened our bylaws and we have strategies and goals we look at each year and try to really look at what we need in this area. We look at data for the region, but it’s, I mean, there’s still a long way to go... we’re still young and still learning...

The interviews and document analysis revealed many of the local councils have limited representation. That is, the voices of underrepresented populations are lacking and there seems to be an overall fear of mentioning historical inequities and larger systemic issues such as racism. One participant shared:

Well, it’s the South. We don’t talk about things like that too much... I mean, I think everyone knows it’s there, but the kind of pushback that I’ve heard is that it isn’t inclusive; that in some communities where everything is all set, its success is at the expense of other things needed in the community. A P-16 can’t do it all...

One strategy council leaders used to ignite difficult conversations around race was by disaggregating and sharing state testing data to demonstrate how current programs are working for some student groups, but not for others. In northeast Texas, a participant talked about how much schooling has changed since the members of their council attended K-12 schools:

It's getting the council to realize the demographics have changed since they went to school. And it's not that the schools are bad. If they were to go sit in a class it would be almost identical to what they saw, not that that's a good thing, but...if they looked around the room, they would not be in the majority.

While council leaders recognized the need for the P-16 council to be inclusive and a place where "people need to be involved and feel as if their opinion is valued and respected," some also acknowledged that the large population of adult learners in their communities were missing both within their council and in conversations about the work. Participants felt those actually implementing the work of P-16 councils, such as teachers and non-profit leaders, were missing due to the dominance of top leaders on councils. However, a participant from southern Texas said the opposite: that councils were too "educator-heavy" because they were originally developed and housed within higher education institutions. Another southeastern participant pointed out,

In some instances, in some of the cities I've seen, it gets to be a little bit of an academic, university-driven movement and people feel as if they are outside of the system. So it's got to include everybody.

In response, the leader from the southern part of Texas reported their council transitioned from higher education to a new model in order to get more community involvement.

Neither document analysis nor interviews with participants indicated that students were included as stakeholder groups on these councils.

**Human capital.** Participants' emphases on creating a seamless governance system was also coupled with the importance of human resources and human capital development within the P-16 movement. That is, collaboration requires the "right people" to come together and work together, which requires, as one participant stressed, "...a group of passionate leaders in our community who I think were waiting for the right infrastructure and right on-ramp and we came at the right time." The most common approach mentioned by participants was to bring "top leadership" and representatives of the different sectors to the table, as these were perceived as the leaders who are "able to make decisions" and do not have the added layer of seeking approval from their respective organizations. These "top" leaders were also described as powerful influencers:

If you look at the P-16 across the Board, we have superintendents, university presidents, and business leaders on the Board, so that when we send out the meeting request, it comes with the message that this is an organization that is serious and that has influence.

Within the P-16 council, leaders recognized characteristics needed for success, including ability to make connections and talk a common language among stakeholders, along with possessing persuasion techniques and willingness to act as a "cheerleader" for the work being done. In some cases, participants saw the need for additional training and support for the council, as cross-sector leadership comes with unique challenges:

I think very often the leaders of movements like this, people are so excited when they get this [well-recognized business leader on the council] and yet that person has no experience in the field doing that kind of work. They know there's a problem. They want to be involved and they are very committed, but we don't provide the training to help them create that collaborative and cooperative environment that is inclusive.

According to participants, another challenge is leadership turnover, which slows down the momentum of councils. More developed councils have institutionalized the structure of the council to help account for this issue by rotating leadership or having certain job titles hold executive positions. Lastly, another governance concern is that serving on a P-16 council is largely volunteer, which does not always provide incentive to follow through on actions discussed in council meetings in a timely manner. In many cases, this is a tacked on role to an already overworked leader as one participant reflected on her job interview with her current employer:

...but when they (my board that was interviewing me) said, “There’s this thing called the P-16 Council and you’ll need to lead that too.” I thought boy, how hard could *that* be? I don’t know, I hadn’t heard that much about it. So, then I accepted the position and I found out what a big animal it really is.

When participants were asked what additional resources the P-16 movement needed to succeed, staffing was the second most common response after funding. The perception was that a staff person could help set the agenda and communicate in between meetings because “if it’s everybody’s job, then it’s nobody’s job.” Thus, having a staff person dedicated to the council, whether part-time or full-time, was perceived as a means to sustain the council over time.

**Financial resource distribution.** In addition to human capital, participants emphasized the importance of financial sustenance. Notwithstanding shared goals across P-16 leaders, some participants mentioned that lack of incentives often lead to inefficiencies in creating a seamless and evenly disbursed education system. Moreover, lack of financial and human resources impaired local actors’ ability to develop much-needed infrastructure. Texas Education Code § 61.076 regarding the state P-16 council recognizes the importance of funding in education:

It is the policy of the State of Texas that the entire system of education supported with public funds be coordinated to provide the citizens with efficient, effective, and high quality educational services and activities.

A participant pointed out that even before the creation of P-16 councils, funding in Texas had been inequitable due to differences between property-rich and property-poor districts, resulting in several “landmark” and continuing court cases. While the state did supply some initial funding, typically in the form of grants, the creation of P-16 councils was described by many participants as an *unfunded mandate*. As one participant reflected,

You know that the legislature can pass all the mandates they want to but most of them are unfunded. If these unfunded mandates pass, there’s no way we can do much of anything. We’re operating on a shoestring.

Shortly after the call to establish local P-16 councils in Texas, an economic recession prompted legislators to cut school funding by almost five billion dollars. While the intention of P-16 councils included seeking efficiency, this can come at a cost, as one state employee reflected on criticisms of the movement:

So pushback- well one, it can be costly at times, because once you put everybody together and you find out problems, sometimes the cost is exceeding the problems. And every two years, you have a [state legislative] session and when you try to fix something, by the time it is fixed, something else is changed. And just being in front of it is difficult...

In the early years of the mandate, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board funded numerous grants to maintain current councils, as well as to help develop councils in new areas. A majority of the P-16 councilpersons included in this study cited grants, especially at the state level, as an important component of their funding. These grants only provided funds over the short-term, which limited P-16 councils to focusing on short-term solutions. Several participants cited the struggle between short-term grants and long-term funding, especially in relationship to establishing the longevity of the P-16 council and their work. One participant highlighted both the importance and danger of grants:

...the first secret of sustainability is the early win and the second is...the long term strategy is to maintain their funding, so they don’t go away. So many start and the organization gets a grant to implement a particular piece of the plan to the next level. And at the end of those three years the grant funding goes away and additional funding comes in to do something else, so ensuring that those long-term funding projects not only get implement[ed], but are sustained.

Another local leader seemed to support this notion, recognizing the P-16 councils' future budgets do not have to be set in stone, but at least a portion of the budget should be established in order to maintain the organization's sustainability.

As mentioned above, the relationship between human capital and funding distribution intertwine, as one participant reflected: "And it's much easier to get grants if you have at least a funded executive director." While the grants helped many of the P-16 councils, the grants and funding, according to participants, began to wane, which resulted in several P-16 councils informally dissolving. One participant who remains on an active council thought, "When the state pulled the money, I'd say about two-thirds of the councils disappeared." The regional councils that seemed most likely to survive the cuts in funding were larger, more developed councils, often located in urban regions. One participant stated, "The P-16 councils I know of, that I envy the most, are the ones with good corporate funding in place somewhere along the way, corporate or community foundation." Interviewees on urban councils acknowledged relying more on funding from local business partnerships, while those from rural areas deal more often with lack of support. While interviewing a leader previously involved in the movement, we learned how her current town was unable to support a P-16 council:

There are lots of resource issues in a rural [area] that are very difficult to address. We are about a two-hour drive from the city and when we are trying to raise funds there are foundations in the city that say, "Oh gosh, if you were closer to us we would absolutely fund." Other groups that say, "You are too close to the city because we have funding in the city and we can't fund more than one site in the community." So it's damned if we do, damned if we don't.

Thus, the lack of support at the state level has hindered some communities from pursuing a state recognized local P-16 council, which may result in unequal access to knowledge and resources across the state depending on geographic location.

As P-16 councils evolved to incorporate more business and workforce development leadership, some P-16 councils sought out more financial support from industry. Other councils responded to decreased state funding by implementing membership fees, which leaders reported with mixed success. One participant remarked,

In the past, we haven't really excluded anybody from the different activities we do where we've said you might have to pay a small fee for this if you're not a member. But for the most part, we haven't had to do that. I think as time goes on, and we continue with our different activities, we may have to do more of that.

Funding for P-16 is tied not only to human resource allocation, but also to the types of policy solutions available. One participant reported, "As to what I think the priorities are, now I will have to tell you, sometimes it's driven a little bit by the funding." When a large portion of funding is grants, P-16 councils adapt their policy solutions to fit within the grant requirements. In other cases, P-16 council leaders have to be strategic with the limited funds available to local districts. One participant said:

We have data provided by the city. And we brought data. And the different school districts brought data. And we looked at what programs were available. So then we kind of went around and said, "Where can we get the most bang for our limited bucks?"

Recall, the councils included in the current study fell into two types of P-16 councils: councils that offer direct service with P-16 interventions or collective impact councils that empower local partnerships. Two organization leaders grouped in the latter category found an added difficulty in obtaining funding:

I think from a funder perspective there is a desire to want to have money be allocated to things that are going to directly impact children. If I'm going to spend some of my money, I want it to be something that either helps this kid get a better grade, go to college, get a scholarship or something that's very tangible. This work—the convening, the aggregating,

of bringing people together— it's just not sexy. And it doesn't, you know, there's only so many pictures you can show in your annual report of groups of people around a table hashing out numbers.

In several cases, P-16 councils are recognized as non-profit organizations, this allows councils to diversify their funding, rather than relying solely on one revenue source, such as state funds.

Collective impact requires instead that funders support a long-term process of social change, which would require a cultural shift in funding as one participant believes the funding could be available:

I don't think it's necessarily funding as much as it is I think the foundation and funders in this region they could first get aligned better, because the reality is that dollars speak and people will change behavior when the dollars or the nature of the dollars are shifting. So, that would be one of my big things is getting funders aligned together.

However, as mentioned earlier, funders often want to support direct services and to be able to see the impact of their money, which is difficult to measure in such an all-encompassing movement.

... We can't stop getting grants and doing our work. But somehow, we're going to move from these one-off projects to these long-term approaches, and we're going to be deliberate. But at the same time, deliberate means that we're going to be slow. And I think that slow—there's this whole American mentality that we've got to do something and we've got to do it right now. And the idea of planning and studying and trying something as a pilot and then tweaking it and studying it some more and trying it again and then studying it some more—that's not in our nature. That's not in our DNA.

The participants' evaluation of their funding support, or lack thereof, influenced their perceptions of both the success and the future of the larger P-16 movement.

### Discussion

While all three influences presented above—shared problem definition, identified policy solutions, and the creation of governance structures—were heading towards change, it is the interplay of these three policy streams that opened a window of opportunity for the establishment of P-16 reform in Texas. One participant summed up the overall convergence of factors stating, "I think locally, when we think about how we've been able to be so rapid, I think a big part of that is the conditions were right." The shared and emerging problem definition required policy solutions that sought alignment across education sectors; and the creation of P-16 councils helped provide the leadership to take action. One participant identified this window of opportunity similarly: "[It was] a group of passionate leaders in our community who I think were waiting for the right infrastructure and the right on-ramp and we [the P-16 council] came at the right time." Yet, according to some participants, the momentum across policy streams has not been consistent over time. Some governance structures disappeared as resources dwindled, while others adapted to changing definitions of the problem.

We also learned that the defining trait (and marker of success) of P-16 councils is collaboration. In addition, policy actors identified the need for an underlying framework to guide the movement toward its goals. While those frameworks may vary according to context, the lack of a foundational framework to guide local actors across the state was identified as a hindrance to goal attainment and sustainability. Political and educational leaders also expressed concern that lack of commitment (both symbolic and material) compromised the sustainability of local measures.

The P-16 reform movement is supported by the idea that multiple factors influence individuals throughout their educational career in order to create *all one system* (Núñez & Oliva, 2009; Lawson, 2010). Despite being criticized by some as a neoliberal policy, the press for collaboration has in large part been successful in getting people with different priorities around the

table to discuss P-16 educational reform (Mansfield & Thachik, 2016). This perception of collaboration within councils has evolved at different rates often due to the makeup of leaders serving on the council. Forming and stabilizing a council requires a careful balance in the number and diversity of voices at the table. It takes time to build trust as councils aim for similar goals, especially since partners have competed for the same resources in the past. In terms of immediate organizational culture, most councils still struggle with limited representation from the “at risk” populations they are meant to serve. Meanwhile, leadership tends to avoid discussing larger systemic issues such as racially- and regionally-based school funding inequities because it is uncomfortable.

The variation of councils within Texas signals the need for an underlying framework for the development and implementation of P-16 educational reform, especially since the movement covers such a large spectrum of educational issues. Councils are finding little consistency across the state, even when it comes to core values of the movement or common terminology used to define the problem. As a result, the goals of the P-16 movement have shifted cyclically as councils focused on what’s popular at the time and more importantly, what is being funded, resulting in little consistency in terms of goals, leadership, and accountability –especially between regions.

The persistent absence of a stable framework has threatened the sustainability of the movement as many leaders are forced to focus on immediate problems and short-term goals, despite recognizing the need to establish and follow a long-term strategic plan to be successful. Despite an initial strong push by the state to establish both the state and local councils, many directly dissolved when funding was pulled. It is important to note that the disappearance of local councils has not transpired evenly across the state. P-16 councils continue prominence in urban areas when compared to their rural counterparts. As a result, this imbalance of representation and access to local P-16 councils further exacerbates educational inequities that already exist within the state, seriously disrupting the initial purposes of the movement.

Add to that, the variety of regional contexts, difficulties of measuring change, a lack of human and financial resources to scale up, and as one participant called it: “a large set of uncoordinated actors in a world of misalignment,” it is not surprising that there is the perception that developing, implementing, and evaluating the P-16 movement in Texas is referred to –as one participant put it– “fighting an uphill battle.” This has implications for not only Texas, but the numerous states across the U.S. that are following Texas’ lead (however murky that may be). In response, we forward recommendations that may potentially shore up the P-16 movement in Texas and beyond.

### **Recommendations**

Our study of Texas’ state and local P-16 councils provides valuable lessons that could inform other states’ P-16 practices, thus, improving goal attainment and sustainability of these leadership councils. These recommendations are presented according to the lessons learned from three major findings. That is, the importance of accurately defining problems and solutions, attaining and maintaining human and financial capital, and designing and implementing governance structures that coalesce with current contexts and support the most important goal of P-16 councils: Collaboration.

#### **Strategies for Defining Problems and Solutions**

**Make diverse council representation foundational to building the organizational culture.** Councils, for the most part, suffer from limited representation, notwithstanding Texas’ changing demographics. While most council members recognize the importance of creating councils that are representative of their communities, participants did not communicate strategies for alleviating the dearth of racial/ethnic diversity. Minding diverse membership on the councils can potentially expand perspectives and approaches to programs, especially when these programs are marketed to student subgroups not presently represented by the council. Thus, it is imperative that purposeful strategic planning to accomplish diverse representation be amplified, rather than

left to chance. State government may want to consider carrot-stick incentives to increase leadership diversity.

**Strategic branding of the P-16 movement generally, and state and local councils in particular, to create identity, intensify recognition, and increase diverse representation within communities.** One way to help increase the diversity of councils might be to clearly communicate a succinct problem statement, along with purposes and goals to a variety of community stakeholders such as parents, teachers, local leaders and policymakers. This includes marketing the group's successes which may spur continued support as the group continues to develop. Strategic branding can also help clean up confusion of the terminology used to describe the movement, whether it is P-16, P-20, cradle to career, and the like as well as clarify mission.

#### **Strategies for Obtaining and Distributing Resources**

**Create funding formulas and programs that incentivize collaboration among sectors.** Since participants identified collaboration as the most important aspect of P-16 endeavors, it may be helpful for states to provide additional funding for councils able to show collaboration beyond the surface level to more focused networking and information sharing, for example. As the sectors continue to realize the importance of working together, funding formulas should incentivize collaborations and encourage sectors to work together outside of routine council meetings. This pooling of resources could help encourage new ways of systemic thinking, rather than one-time programs usually correlating with grant cycles. Incentivizing collaboration could help create sustainable funding streams for P-16 work.

**Establish less restrictive grants that allow for a longer implementation time frame to better measure long-term progress.** While grants were a common source of capital for P-16 councils, these bequests also contributed to the tendency for individual councils to constantly shift foci to match each particular grant, lasting only through the grant period. Especially during the early stages of development, the state should provide grants that are flexible to meet the contextual complexities and various approaches chosen by P-16 council leaders.

#### **Strategies for Designing P-16 Governance**

**Re-establish state-wide professional development programs to coordinate sharing of best practices and narrowing of policy solutions.** State-wide programs can help local P-16 councils network and identify best practices that can be adapted for different localities, especially for P-16 councils at different stages of development. It would also be an opportunity for local issues to be heard and addressed at the state level, such as struggles among rural P-16 councils where resources and people are dispersed over a larger geographic area. This combination of top-down and bottom-up communication would help both the local and state levels in identifying the future direction for P-16 work.

**Create informational websites detailing similar types of P-16 collaborations and programs to help counter duplication of processes.** As a participant pointed out, at times it can feel like P-16 is "programs upon programs." As multiple groups or councils form with similar goals and initiatives, a centralized resource depot detailing various site's goals and programs could help provide more opportunities for collaborations. As participants deemed resources critical to the success of P-16 councils, information sharing could potentially increase efficiency in the use of both human and financial capital. Relatedly, designating a full-time state P-16 coordinator may increase the chances that individual councils have the information they need so as not to "reinvent the wheel."

**Create a more thorough framework for theory of change.** A strong state framework can provide P-16 councils with the necessary guidance to endure and flourish through change over time. The framework needs to include a strategic plan that focuses not only on short-term goals, but a long-term vision as P-16 programs. While a stronger framework is needed, it should not be so rigid as to hinder adaptations based on community context. Moreover, a process for evaluation and adaptation could potentially strengthen the asserted theory of change.

### Conclusion

Texas' P-16 councils have adapted, albeit at varying success levels, to the changing context since they were originally developed. Nationwide, the problems that the P-16 movement seeks to address, such as college and career readiness, student access, and student achievement, remain top policy issues nationwide, providing argument for further study of the movement. This study is limited by the sampling technique, which resulted in a self-selected sample based on publically available information that may not have been up to date. Participants from surviving councils may have been more motivated to self-select into the study. While an exhaustive search was conducted for related documents and potential participants, the internet may have skewed the sample with more current documents due to the increased use of the web and technology. Also, using a case study approach does not lead to applying conclusions to other states. Thus, additional studies of other large, disparate states would lend credence to our findings specific to Texas.

P-16 councils have the potential to inform and impact the concerns of college and career readiness, student access, and student achievement, but they need stable support to rise above the governance barriers that have contributed to the demise of P-16 state councils across the United States. In addition, the shift in P-16 councils' funding from the state to private industry, may potentially shift original intent, which was to align policies and practices across the PK-12 and higher education pipeline. As additional sectors, such as business and health, express concerns about "failing schools" and the need to align the P-16 pipeline, it is important that educators in elementary, secondary, and postsecondary institutions, along with community stakeholders, maintain and expand their presence and influence in the cradle to career conversations.

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