

SECTION 3 | HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS

Question researched for the 50 states

1. *Are statewide high school graduation course requirements aligned with statewide or systemwide college admissions course requirements that exist in 28 states?*

Forty-seven states have established statewide minimum high school graduation requirements, all of which are or will be in effect by the 2014-15 school year. Three states do not have minimum requirements but may provide guidelines:

- ✦ Colorado has adopted new guidelines for fall 2020.
- ✦ Massachusetts has a recommended high school program of study called MassCore.
- ✦ Pennsylvania has neither graduation requirements nor a recommended program of study.

Of the 47 states with high school graduation requirements, 18 states have complete or partial alignment between those requirements and statewide higher education minimum admission requirements. This section discusses the alignment between high school and higher education policies and how coordinating these two policies may lead to higher postsecondary enrollment, persistence and completion rates.

The section also explores “competency-based” degree programs that focus more on what students learn, rather than where or how long the learning takes place. Instead of evaluating student progress on the amount of time spent in a classroom (using the credit hour, which is the default standard for measuring progress), students receive college credit based on their actual demonstration of skills learned.¹

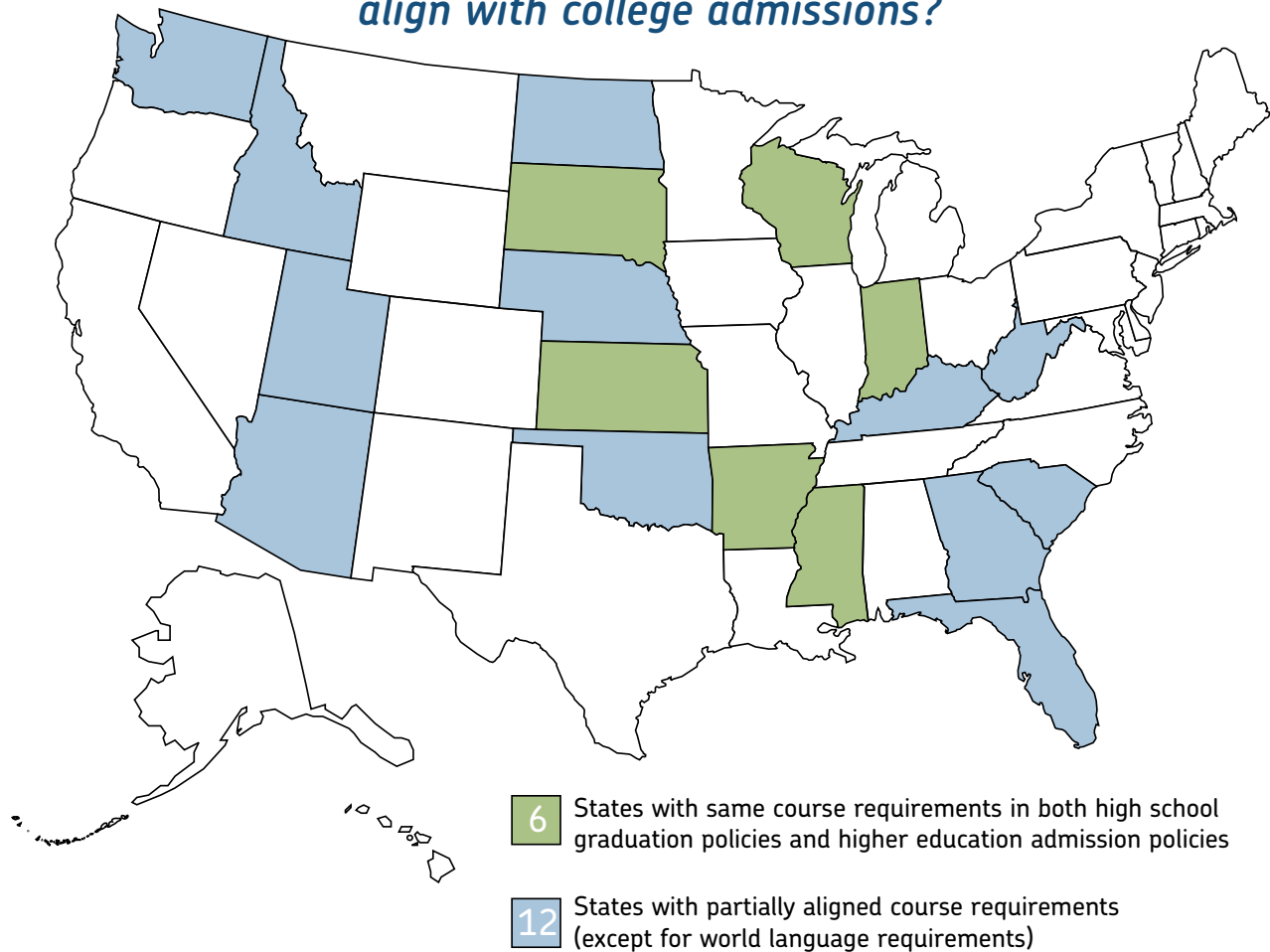
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POLICY GOALS

As the need for postsecondary credentials in the workforce increases, state leaders are strengthening policies to improve the transition of students from high school to higher education. These policies typically encompass multiple goals, including:

- ✦ Aligning statewide minimum high school graduation requirements with statewide minimum higher education admission standards.
- ✦ Creating transparency between high schools and higher education institutions about college readiness standards.
- ✦ Increasing the number of high school graduates entering postsecondary institutions.
- ✦ Providing multiple options for meeting the minimum course requirements in both high school and higher education. Examples include the use of competency-based assessment results and the scores on Advanced Placement exams.
- ✦ Providing multiple options for determining a student’s level of college readiness in areas other than course requirements, such as GPA or class rank.

Do state course requirements for high school graduation align with college admissions?



STATE ANALYSIS

Of the 47 states with minimum high school graduation requirements, six states have completely aligned their statewide minimum higher education admissions policies. This means alignment in both subject and units required, such as successfully completing four credits or semesters of math to complete high school graduation requirements and to fulfill college admissions policies.

Twelve states have partially aligned their high school exit and postsecondary admission policies, meaning they are aligned in English, math, science and social studies. In all 12 instances, the lack of alignment is in world languages. Statewide higher education admission policies mandate the completion of language courses in these states, but high school graduation policies do not. Instead, world language courses are typically just one option high school students may choose to fulfill their graduation requirements outside the academic core.

Of the remaining states, seven do not have alignment between their high school graduation policies and higher education admission policies, and 22 states do not have minimum statewide admission policies for their four-year public institutions. Some graduation requirements are higher than admissions requirements, or vice versa, and some admission policies do not include specific course requirements.

Interestingly, three states' high school graduation requirements — except for world language requirements — aligned their higher education admissions policies in the number of courses required. In all three cases — Arizona, Utah and West Virginia — the requirements were higher in social studies at the high school level than at the college level.

Bringing together educators from high schools and higher education to focus on the skills and knowledge students need to know can work to raise awareness of the disconnect and to build consensus about how to address it. Eleventh- and 12th-grade transition courses can be built by faculty teams working together to consider the content of remedial courses and the extent to which they align with high school or college first-year course expectations. The intent is to create more consistent (statewide) policies, aligned courses and improved success to address the remedial needs of students.

KEY POLICY ACTIONS

With the increased attention to college and career readiness, high school graduation requirements should reflect postsecondary and workplace standards. To create seamless transitions between high school and college, state leaders should consider the following policy elements:

- ✦ Align statewide minimum high school graduation course requirements with statewide minimum higher education admission course requirements.
- ✦ Introduce early interventions for high school students not meeting graduation and college readiness standards by the 11th grade.
- ✦ Create alternate routes/diplomas for high school graduation.
- ✦ Incorporate multiple measures to determine a student's college and career readiness, including recognition of non-cognitive or "soft" skills through options such as student portfolios.
- ✦ Provide competency-based options to show proficiency in course requirements, both at the high school and postsecondary levels.

Competency-based pathways can provide opportunities for advancement through demonstrated mastery of a subject rather than course completion or "seat-time" requirements.² States should consider competency-based proficiency when creating or updating high school graduation requirements.

Many states provide some form of competency-based assessment or substitutions for high school graduation course requirements. Career and technical education courses are commonly used as substitute courses. Integrating these courses into high school curricula emphasizes career readiness as well as college readiness.

The concept of competency-based pathways highlights a trend among states to move away from seat time and to create options for students to earn credit outside of the classroom.³ Many of the high school graduation policies reviewed describe multiple measures for students to show college or career readiness and to qualify for a high school diploma.

To improve policy alignment, states should evaluate the extent to which their high school and higher education policies are preparing students for success. Encouraging collaboration between K-12 and college policymakers and practitioners will only increase the effectiveness of college readiness, access and completion policies. Exploring these topics will help ensure more students are prepared to pursue their college and career goals.



CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

ECS has identified critical challenges and opportunities for states to consider when creating and adopting these policies:

The Challenge: Need for alternate options to show course content competency

Opportunities for how to address the challenge

- ✦ Increase availability of Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, career and technical education, and dual enrollment courses.
- ✦ Incorporate assessments into graduation requirements to demonstrate content knowledge and college readiness. Assessments can include end-of-course exams, standardized tests or competency-based exams.

The Challenge: Lack of collaboration between high schools and postsecondary institutions

Opportunities for how to address the challenge

- ✦ Create working partnerships between the governing bodies for K-12 and postsecondary.
- ✦ Establish common language and clear benchmarks in the state's high school graduation and higher education admission requirement policies.
- ✦ Evaluate standards at the high school and postsecondary levels to find ways to better align the policies, involving educators in the process.

The Challenge: Significant number of students need remediation courses

Opportunities for how to address the challenge

- ✦ Analyze differences and commonalities with policies regarding high school graduation requirements, statewide higher education admission requirements and college course placement policies.
- ✦ Deliver early intervention initiatives to address remedial needs at the high school level through a partnership between high school and higher education faculty.
- ✦ Align course rigor at the high school and postsecondary levels.

EXAMPLES OF STATE POLICIES

Approaches to consider

The following examples illustrate the variety of approaches states may take to adopt an aligned set of high school graduation and higher education admission policies. States are looking at new ways to measure student readiness — beyond course requirements or seat time — by utilizing a common set of metrics across high school and higher education.

WASHINGTON

Collaboration between high schools and postsecondary institutions



The State Board of Education and the Washington Student Achievement Council met in 2010 to align the high school graduation requirements and the statewide admission requirements. They established the **College Academic Distribution Requirements (CADRs)**.

The CADRs provide high school students with a guideline of what colleges will, at a minimum, require for students to be admitted to four-year public institutions. The CADRs provide an example of high school and higher education collaborating to create greater access to postsecondary education. Aligning the two sets of requirements helps students develop an academic plan early in their high school careers.

SOUTH DAKOTA

Alternate options to show course competency



South Dakota's high school graduation requirements and statewide higher education admission policies provide a prime example of competency-based proficiency for course requirements. A provision in the high school graduation requirements policy (**S.D. Admin. R. 24:43:11:09**) provides course equivalency exam exceptions for students in lieu of course requirements.

Similarly, the **statewide higher education admission policy** provides alternate opportunities to meet the minimum course requirements beyond seat time. Within each subject area, students can receive credit by achieving a specific benchmark on standardized assessments such as ACT or SAT or on end-of-course exams such as Advanced Placement tests.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Competency-Based Education (Chicago: Council for Adult and Experiential Learning), <http://www.cael.org/what-we-do/competency-based-education> (accessed Oct. 1, 2014)
- 2 Chris Sturgis and Susan Patrick, *When Success is the Only Option: Designing Competency-Based Pathways for Next Generation Learning*, (Vienna, VA: MetisNet and International Association for K-12 Online Learning, November 2010), <http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/csd6174.pdf>.
- 3 National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), *Rethinking "Seat Time:" State Approaches to Earning Credit in Out-of-School Time*, (Denver, CO: NCSL, 2012), <http://www.ncsl.org/documents/educ/SeatTime.pdf>.