

# The Importance of the Common Core State Standards and Assessments to Achieving K-12/ Postsecondary Education Alignment



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## Introduction

In June 2010, the Common Core State Standards were unveiled. The culmination of many months of work, the standards reflect a multi-state expectation for the English and math skills that K-12 students must possess to do college level work or participate in a meaningful career path.<sup>1</sup> In relatively short order, the standards were adopted by 45 states and the District of Columbia.

The standards create the foundation for stronger alignment efforts across K-12 and higher education systems by proposing a shared reference point for what constitutes college readiness. The standards provide a context for meaningful dialogue between high schools and colleges about how to prepare students for college and careers. They also create the basis for an assessment infrastructure that can measure student achievement and support the identification of strategies and approaches that accelerate and deepen college preparation

during high school. Better alignment between students' experiences in high school and in postsecondary settings has the potential to save time, reduce frustration, and lead to more students completing degrees and certificates that have value in the workplace, for which the nation's economy has an increasing need.

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## The Strength of Common Core Standards

The strength of the Common Core Standards rests on a number of key principles. In developing the Common Core, the goal was to emerge with standards that were “fewer, clearer, and higher.” The following considerations guided the writing of the standards:

- **Reflect college and career readiness:** The standards represent the literacy and numeracy knowledge and skills needed for students to engage in entry-level college coursework and the learning required to succeed in meaningful career paths.
- **Research- and evidence-based:** The development of the standards relied on available research and evidence relative to what skills are required of students entering college and workforce training programs. Research and evidence were not always available, however, for each decision reflected by the standards.
- **Internationally benchmarked:** The standards reflect a rigorous set of expectations that ensure young adults are internationally competitive.
- **Focused, coherent and rigorous:** The standards address the problem of previous standards being “an inch deep and a mile wide.” Significant attention was paid to grade-by-grade progression and how skills and concepts build upon one another.

As with any effort of the Common Core's magnitude and scope, educators debate how effectively these principles were met. Evaluation and refinement of the standards will continue, especially as new research emerges on their impact and application.

## Higher Education and the Common Core

A strategic motivation behind the creation of the standards was the reality that significant numbers of high school graduates are entering higher education institutions underprepared for college-level work. This reality is borne out by the troubling statistics showing a large number of students enrolled in developmental education courses and the substantial state, institutional, and student costs associated with remediation.<sup>6</sup> Students assigned to developmental education courses have a much lower likelihood of ever graduating with a college credential. The Common Core movement could improve college readiness by delivering effective interventions before high school students graduate.

Higher education faculty were involved in the creation of the standards. The explicit goal in developing the standards was that they define the literacy and numeracy skills necessary for students to succeed in entry-level college courses. Higher education is also involved in the development of the assessments aligned to the standards. Again, the explicit goal for these assessments is that they serve as valid tools to measure students' readiness.

It is worth noting, however, that the involvement of higher education faculty in this work has been limited to those who were either formally invited to participate or who have voluntarily engaged in the numerous opportunities to comment or weigh in on the work. In the end, this is a relatively small number of individuals. The awareness and understanding by the broader higher education community of the standards and assessments is still relatively limited—a situation that needs attention.

The hope is that the standards and accompanying interventions increase the number of students that graduate high school ready to succeed in postsecondary education. The standards can lead to a smoother and more efficient transition for students between high school and college.

### Defining college readiness

While the standards provide elements of a “college-readiness” definition, they do not purport to be a complete definition. One way to help catalyze greater alignment between the K-12 and higher education sectors within a state is to take the foundation represented by the Common Core, and collaborate to identify a statewide, shared, and fuller definition of “college and career ready.” A common definition between the K-12 sector and the postsecondary education sector within a state creates the “tie that binds”—a shared vision of the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in entry-level college courses.

The value of this work is not simply the production of a document. Rather it is the process of cross-sector engagement that creates increased understanding and mutual accountability between the two anchor players in the knowledge delivery chain. A greater understanding of the incentives that policymakers use to initiate change and the respective approaches to teaching and learning could improve the ownership for graduating college- and career-prepared students.

Several states, including Colorado, Hawai'i, Kentucky, and Montana have either developed statewide definitions of college and career readiness or are in the process of doing so. In some states (e.g., Massachusetts), the process for doing this involves extensive conversations across the state in local and regional settings that include both higher education faculty and K-12 teachers. The benefits of this work go beyond finding common ground around a definition, but extend to establishing opportunities for much deeper, ongoing collaboration. In most cases, this work is not simply left to occur organically, but is precipitated by strong state leadership.

It is not necessary that the same definition be shared among all states that have adopted the Common Core Standards or that are members of each assessment consortium—although many definitions may have common features. What is most important is that the definitions are developed and understood jointly by the K-12 and higher education sectors within the state, and both sectors share a vision and responsibility for reaching a goal where more students graduate college and career ready.

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### Higher education's interest and role in implementation and sustainability

It is increasingly well documented and researched that the U.S. economy will require more individuals with postsecondary degrees and credentials to meet workforce needs, and to support the U.S. in being internationally competitive.<sup>7</sup> The education sector must operate in a way that helps more individuals achieve this result—and do so in a timely, efficient, and cost-effective way. The Common Core Standards can support higher student achievement by ensuring a broader pool of ready talent that could enter degree and credential granting programs.

The Common Core Standards and assessments are still in a very early stage of their adoption and use. They generally reflect a higher level of knowledge and skills than most states previously had in place. If the assessments are developed as they have been designed, then measures of college readiness in English/language arts and mathematics will be much more rigorous than current state measures, and will drive state

and system policymakers to adopt strategies to aid students in reaching new and higher benchmarks. Higher education must be engaged to understand, embrace, and help implement the standards and assessments, and realize the benefit of having a more reliable pipeline of more appropriately educated candidates arrive on their doorsteps. Higher education can also be a voice for staying the course with the standards and assessments, which can serve to counter potential efforts to back away from these reforms when initial results show many students not meeting the college-ready standard.

Additionally, with the Common Core Standards, postsecondary education must take a more active role in helping to support high school activities that focus on helping students achieve college readiness. While the Common Core can signal to high school students the knowledge and skills necessary to thrive in college, postsecondary institutions can provide a greater level of depth. For public education, the higher education community can share the lessons learned in remedial and developmental education to ensure that the same mistakes are not repeated.

While states develop systematic early interventions for underprepared high school students, Colleges of Education will need to prepare pre-service teachers for how the Common Core standards and assessments will affect teacher training, induction, and professional development.

### ***Lessons from Alignment Experiences (Core to College)***

Since January 2012, Education First has engaged 10 states through the Core to College (<http://rockpa.org/page.aspx?pid=580>) project. Core to College is a project of Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors with support from the Lumina Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation of New York.” The initiative facilitates greater collaboration and alignment between K-12 and postsecondary education systems around the implementation of Common Core standards, aligned assessments, and potential interventions. During its first year, the Core to College project learned the following:

- ***Lack of awareness among postsecondary actors:*** While some higher education leaders are highly involved in the Common Core discussions, most faculty and administrators lack specific knowledge about the standards and their implications for college and career readiness. Engaging higher education actors is important because it creates a greater understanding about how the Common Core will change the input side of higher education. More, clearer and better communications are needed to support greater awareness. All Core to College states are doing significant outreach to higher education institutions to increase their awareness around the Common Core Standards.
- ***Faculty engagement is important:*** Alignment hinges on engaging faculty in understanding the standards and assessment, especially faculty who teach entry-level (freshman) courses. If these front-line instructors are on-board, they can champion the benefits of the Common Core to their peers. What’s more, they could partner in identifying ways that high schools could adopt effective instructional approaches to improve students’ readiness.
- ***Get higher education involved in the assessments:*** Increased awareness by higher education can be fostered by greater involvement in assessment-related issues including item development, piloting and research. The Common Core assessments provide a substantive context for postsecondary faculty to gain important insight into the standards and understand the strength of the assessment for measuring important college readiness knowledge and skills.
- ***Alignment with a purpose:*** Content-area teachers and faculty share a common bond: their discipline and their curriculum. The Common Core provides a context and opportunity for teachers and faculty members to engage around curriculum alignment and to discuss how they can support their students’ college readiness, and improve the transition from high school to college. CalPass and the National Writing Project are notable examples of such engagement. In these cases, cross-sector engagement has led to curriculum redesign and alignment that benefits students and leads to a more successful student experience.
- ***Strong leadership is essential:*** Collaborations between higher education and K-12 can be complex and complicated. Promoting such collaborations requires strong and consistent leadership, patience, and persistence.

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## Strategies

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The Core to College experience suggests a number of strategies to generate greater K-12/higher education alignment. These are:

- **Prioritize alignment.** The idea of alignment has to be apparent on the policy agenda, and has to be a deliberate effort with committed leadership. Prioritization may also require dedicating individuals to focus on this work in order to ensure that it happens. Prioritization should include setting clear goals and delineating how the higher education and K-12 sectors should participate in alignment activity (while still allowing flexibility in approaches so that alignment work can be customized to meet each community's needs). Policymakers and practitioners should anticipate which data are needed to identify strengths and weaknesses, to evaluate progress toward a common goal, and make course corrections as needed.
- **Expand high-quality dual enrollment opportunities and foster higher education/K-12 collaboration in designing high school courses that lead to remediation-free graduates, or result in college credit.** Dual enrollment opportunities allow students to gain a better understanding of what college-level work truly entails and help accelerate student progress toward attainment of a postsecondary credential. Underprepared high school students could benefit from dual credit programs. Cross-sector collaboration can also lead to the adoption of accelerated, compressed, and modular approaches. Tying these high school interventions to dual enrollment and transfer credit programs could improve postsecondary recognition of the legitimacy of these instructional models.
- **Create localized opportunities for collaboration in which higher education faculty and high school teachers interact and work toward great alignment.** Coordinated and meaningful interaction within local communities between colleges and the high schools from which their students come can lead to powerful changes that drive improved student achievement. These efforts can result in curriculum alignment, shared programming and student engagement.
- **Identify successful strategies for even earlier intervention with students who are not on-track to being college ready.** While the grade-11 Common Core assessments provide a final signal of a student's level of college readiness, testing in grades K-8 will provide an early warning relative to students not on track to being college ready. States should seek to identify strategies middle and high schools can use to address the needs of students whose test scores show them to not be on track to college readiness earlier in their academic careers. A goal of more students graduating high school having already earned college credit can be reached by ensuring that middle school students are on track to being college ready.
- **Use data analysis to identify strategies that successfully improve outcomes for students who are not on track to being college ready.** Achieving a better understanding of the factors that challenge students in reaching college readiness can help inform the on-going public policy debate, and lead to the identification of instructional approaches that are most effective in helping students accelerate more quickly. Most importantly, robust data analysis can be used to inform the ongoing Common Core efforts related to the implementation of standards, assessments, and related interventions.
- **Engage business and economic development professionals in identifying high-demand career pathways that can lead to K-12/postsecondary collaboration in the design of high-quality, aligned programs of study.** This type of approach can drive an even more robust alignment of the educational sectors around specific needs to support community and state economic development efforts. Alignment viewed through the lens of a particular workforce need can result in powerful programs that can serve to accelerate economic activity. Implementing these strategies will not be easy. The K-12 and higher education sectors have long histories of operating within their own silos. Dismantling these silos and creating the conditions for productive dialogue and policymaking will take leadership and commitment, persuasion, and even a little cajoling. Some of this will come from political leaders, but some must also come from leaders within the K-12 and higher education sectors. Finding and identifying champions to lead the work and speak to its significance can create a climate conducive to real change.

## Conclusion

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This is an exciting time in public education. Reforms centered on standards, assessments, teaching and accountability are in their nascent stages. Time will be required to ensure full and successful implementation. A key component of that success will be the strength of collaborations that are built around these reform efforts. One of the most fundamental of these collaborations will be the one between higher education and K-12 education. These two sectors must commit themselves to developing the strong collaborations that can and will have a tremendous impact on the success of the current reforms.



## Endnotes

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- 1 Of course, knowledge and skills in English/language arts and mathematics are only components of a broader set of knowledge, skills and competencies that comprise a full definition of college and career readiness.
- 2 Achieve, Inc., The Education Trust, & The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, *Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma that Counts* (Washington: American Diploma Project, 2004), [http://www.achieve.org/files/ADPsummary\\_5.pdf](http://www.achieve.org/files/ADPsummary_5.pdf).
- 3 Constance Clark, & Peter W. Cookson, Jr., *High Standards Help Struggling Students: New Evidence*. (Washington: Education Sector, 2012), [http://www.educationsector.org/sites/default/files/publications/Equity\\_CYCT\\_RELEASED.pdf](http://www.educationsector.org/sites/default/files/publications/Equity_CYCT_RELEASED.pdf).
- 4 Council on Foreign Relations, U.S. Education Reform and National Security. (Washington: Council on Foreign Relations, 2013), [http://i.cfr.org/content/publications/attachments/TFR68\\_Education\\_National\\_Security.pdf](http://i.cfr.org/content/publications/attachments/TFR68_Education_National_Security.pdf).
- 5 William Schmidt and Curtis McKnight, *Inequality for All: The Challenge of Unequal Opportunity in American Schools* (Virginia Beach: Economic Policy Institute, 2012).
- 6 Thomas Bailey, Dong Wook Jeong, and Sung Woo, *Referral, Enrollment, and Completion in Developmental Education Sequences in Community Colleges* (New York: Community College Research Center, 2009), <http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/referral-enrollment-completion-developmental.pdf>.
- 7 Anthony P. Carnevale and Stephen J. Rose, *The Undereducated American* (Washington: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2011), <http://cew.georgetown.edu/undereducated>.