



## The Common Core State Standards

Recent years have seen the pace of change in education accelerate at all levels as educators and policy makers instigate reforms aimed at raising academic achievement in the United States to a world-class level. Perhaps nowhere has the pace and scale of change been more dramatic than in the realm of K–12 academic standards. In 2009, 48 states, two territories, and the District of Columbia signed a memorandum of agreement with the National Governors Association (NGA) and Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), committing to a state-led process—the Common Core State Standards Initiative—to produce a set of K–12 standards in the foundational subjects of English language arts and mathematics designed to prepare high school graduates to succeed in college and careers. On June 2, 2010, the

Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were released.

The standards are grounded in evidence, including: the best work of states and high-performing nations, frameworks developed for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the Benchmarks of the American Diploma Project, academic research, curriculum surveys, assessment data on college- and career-ready performance, and input from educators at all levels and on a variety of subjects. Based on research by Achieve, ACT, and others which found that the core knowledge and skills in mathematics and English language arts necessary for success in college and in good jobs have converged, the CCSS make no distinction between college and career readiness. As of December 2010, 41 states and the District of Columbia have formally adopted the CCSS. Most states will begin implementing the standards in schools in 2011–2012.

To develop the standards, CCSSO and NGA worked with representatives from participating states, as well as a wide range of educators, content experts, researchers, national organizations, and community groups. According to NGA and CCSSO, the standards were developed to achieve the following outcomes:

- To align with college and work expectations.
- To include rigorous content *and* application of knowledge through higher-order skills.
- To build upon strengths and lessons of current state standards.
- To reflect expectations of top-performing countries so that all U.S. students are prepared to succeed in our global economy.
- To be evidence and/or research-based.

Representative panels of postsecondary faculty, convened by leading scholarly societies in partnership with the American Council on Education, helped review and shape the standards. Within the states, college and university faculty were typically called upon to review the standards as well.

The CCSS, because they are anchored in college- and career-ready expectations, will ensure that students graduate from high school ready to enter and succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing college courses *without the need for remediation*. Improved academic preparation in high schools is expected to contribute to increasing college completion. For these outcomes to occur, states need a careful and thoughtful plan for implementing the CCSS, including the development of integrated and aligned K–12 and postsecondary policies and practices. As a

result, the higher education community must be not only informed about the CCSS, but also engaged as a full partner in their implementation. While public colleges and universities may be most fully engaged in implementing the CCSS, independent and for-profit institutions also have an important role to play and are encouraged to participate to the extent they choose to do so.

This issue brief describes key areas that will require active participation from higher education leaders and faculty from a broad array of disciplines, in the following areas:

- Defining college readiness and aligning key policies for the school-to-college transition.
- Developing K–12 assessments and aligning college placement policies with these assessments.
- Aligning K–12 and higher education curricula.
- Teacher preparation and in-service professional development.

The issue brief also suggests structures at the state and local levels that can help facilitate collaboration between K–12 and higher education. It concludes with links to detailed information about the standards and related assessments.

## Key Areas for Higher Education Engagement

**Aligning Key Policies for College Readiness.** While the CCSS represent an important step, they are only one part of a broader agenda to align key policies for the school-to-college transition. For example, students and schools also need to understand college expectations in key academic areas beyond mathematics and English language arts, such as science, social studies, and foreign language. At the state level, K–12 and public higher education must fill in the gaps left by the CCSS by developing a more holistic definition of college readiness, including but not limited to mastery of the common standards. Such a definition may include establishing a model college-preparatory curriculum, defining standards in other academic areas, and specifying the other key skills students must develop to be college-ready. Statewide agreement on this definition will help frame subsequent discussions about key policies for the school-to-college transition, such as high school graduation requirements, course requirements for college admission, and college-level course placement standards, all of which send clear signals about expectations for college readiness.

It is important to note that, while the CCSS define the knowledge and skills that students must possess in mathematics and English language arts in order to be ready for college-level work, they do not set—or even suggest—minimum standards for college or university admission. Even if students are eventually unable to earn a high school diploma without meeting the CCSS benchmarks, there will still be considerable variation in student performance

above that minimum standard. It will be up to higher education leaders and faculty to determine the standards of performance that are necessary for admission, separate from placement requirements.

### **Development of K–12 Assessments and Alignment with College**

**Placement Policies.** There is general agreement that the CCSS will not result in appreciable learning gains unless they are accompanied by state-of-the-art assessments, a means of holding students and schools accountable, and aligned curricula and instruction.

The U.S. Department of Education's Race to the Top grant competition included \$362 million to fund a new generation of common assessments tied to the CCSS. In order for these assessments to have credibility as measures of college readiness, they must be developed with the participation of, and have significant buy-in from, the higher education community. To signal the importance of having higher education present and involved, the Department of Education made agreement by colleges and universities to participate in the design and development of the new assessments, with the goal of using the new tests to measure students' readiness for credit-bearing coursework, a major criterion for the Race to the Top assessment competition.

Two multi-state consortia, the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium, were awarded grants in September 2010. As shown in the table on the next page, as of December 2010, 44 states and the District of Columbia had agreed to participate in at least one of the two

consortia. Work is just beginning to design new assessment systems for grades 3 through 8 and high school, with the mandate that these assessments become operational in 2014–15. To establish a consistent standard for adults who have left school and seek an equivalency credential such as that offered by passing the GED<sup>®</sup> tests, the American Council on Education plans

to align the next generation of the GED<sup>®</sup> assessment to the CCSS along a similar time frame.

Although each consortium will take a somewhat different approach to engaging higher education in its member states, a goal common to both consortia is that public colleges and universities will ultimately recognize an agreed-upon score on a summative 11th grade

**Common Core State Standards:  
Assessment Consortia Participation (as of December 2010)**

	Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC)	SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium
<b>Governing States</b>	Arizona Arkansas District of Columbia Florida Georgia Illinois Indiana Louisiana Maryland Massachusetts New York Rhode Island Tennessee	Connecticut Hawaii Idaho Kansas Maine Michigan Missouri Montana Nevada New Mexico North Carolina Oregon Utah Vermont Washington West Virginia Wisconsin
<b>Participating/ Advisory States</b>	Alabama California Colorado Delaware Kentucky Mississippi New Jersey North Dakota Ohio Oklahoma Pennsylvania South Carolina	Alabama Colorado Delaware Iowa Kentucky New Hampshire New Jersey North Dakota Ohio Oklahoma Pennsylvania South Carolina South Dakota

Note: These lists reflect state participation as of December 2010; state-level participation, especially for participating/advisory states, will continue to evolve over time. Governing states may belong to only one consortium and commit to using the assessments in 2014–15. Participating/advisory states may join more than one consortium and make no firm commitment to use the assessments. See For More Information at the end of this paper for additional details.

assessment as indication that a student is ready for entry-level credit-bearing courses, and thereby exempt those students from remediation in mathematics and/or English. This approach is modeled on the Early Assessment Program in California, which exempts students who meet a set score on that state's 11th grade assessment from taking placement exams at either the California Community Colleges or California State University, and certifies that these students are ready for those institutions' entry-level, credit-bearing math and English courses. Importantly, this system gives an early warning to students if they are not ready for credit-bearing college coursework in English and math *while they are still in high school* and have an opportunity to correct deficiencies during their senior year, thereby decreasing the need for remediation.

Of course, placement is more complicated than just certifying that students are ready for a single course. Students who meet the standard in the 11th grade may be required to take additional courses in the 12th grade, and could still need to take an institutional placement exam in order to determine appropriate placement within that institution's array of credit-bearing courses. Institutions may debate the feasibility and even the advisability of standardizing placement policies at the system or state level. However, given the commitment many institutions have already made as part of the Race to the Top assessment competition, colleges and universities need to seriously consider creating consistent placement standards for similar entry-level courses, aligned with the new Common Core standards and K–12 assessments. Doing so will provide a clear, consistent,

and meaningful signal to school leaders, teachers, students, and parents about the expectations of higher education. Faculty, academic administrators, and registrars will need to be deeply involved in these discussions.

Perhaps the greatest benefit of the new assessments will accrue not to the students who are deemed college-ready, but rather to those students who are not yet ready and can access additional assistance during their senior year of high school. Here too, higher education faculty can work closely with their K–12 colleagues to design interventions that help struggling students reach the college-ready level while still in high school.

### **Development and Alignment of Curricula and Instructional Materials.**

Just as states will be working hard to develop new assessments aligned to Common Core State Standards, there will be a tremendous need for new curricula and instructional materials aligned to the new standards. Already, textbook publishers and other content providers are rushing to update their materials. Higher education faculty can play a valuable role by collaborating with teachers as they develop new instructional materials, and by helping states and school districts evaluate curricula and instructional materials for alignment with the CCSS.

As high schools align their curricula to the CCSS, higher education institutions will face questions about their own courses. Will students who successfully complete a college-ready curriculum transition seamlessly into first-year college courses? Do those courses assume mathematics or English language arts knowledge and skills that are not part of the CCSS? Do curricula for relevant remedial and adult

education courses align to the common core? The CCSS thus opens up two types of exciting opportunities for higher education faculty: to work in collaboration with K–12 educators to create seamless transitions between sectors, and to reassess their own curricula for adult, developmental, and general education in light of these new common state benchmarks.

**Teacher Preparation and In-Service Professional Development.** As states move toward implementation of the CCSS, perhaps no issue looms larger for higher education than teacher preparation and professional development. Will current and new teachers be ready to teach to the new higher standards? What must colleges and universities do—both in their colleges of education and in their schools of arts and sciences—to prepare teachers to be effective?

In reaction to or parallel with the CCSS, there has been recent national activity on teacher preparation and professional development. In October 2010, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) released a draft of new model teaching standards that are aligned to the CCSS to guide state policy in areas such as program approval and teacher certification and licensure. The American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education (AACTE) has called for the creation of teacher performance assessments and professional development programs linked to the CCSS. At the discipline level, the Conference Board on the Mathematical Sciences (CBMS) recently held a national conference on content-based professional development for teachers of mathematics. Clearly, K–12 and higher education will have to collaborate closely—with support from national organizations

like these—in order to help current and future teachers succeed.

## Avenues for Collaboration

Many states have mechanisms in place that can facilitate collaboration across K–12 and higher education on the agenda described. The most common of these are state or regional P–20 councils. While some of these bodies are very effective, many lack a clear action agenda, do not enjoy active support from key stakeholders such as the governor or business leaders, and operate under a model of passive information-sharing rather than engaged collaboration and shared decision making. The CCSS present the opportunity to invigorate or restructure these councils around a clear and urgent action agenda.

Whether or not a state chooses to utilize the structure of a P–20 council for this work, the professionals who typically staff these councils can play a crucial role as hubs of information, conveners, and catalysts for action. Existing—or newly developed—collaborative relationships between state agency leaders in higher education (SHEEOs) and K–12 education (Chief State School Officers) may be leveraged as another setting for cross-sector dialogue and action. Regardless of the venue that leaders use, the CCSS present higher education and K–12 leaders with the opportunity to forge consensus on key policies and set expectations for collaboration that can then filter throughout both education systems.

Another important structure for collaboration is statewide groups in the academic disciplines. For example, Maryland has a statewide mathematics group that includes faculty from all types of institutions as well as K–12

teachers. Such groups will be invaluable as states wrestle with implementation in the areas such as assessment, curriculum, and teacher preparation and professional development. Likewise, state- or system-wide groups that bring together chief academic officers and/or deans can be important vehicles for disseminating information and engaging campus participation.

Finally, a number of cities, such as El Paso and San Diego, have already developed close partnerships among colleges, universities, and school districts. These existing partnerships can take implementation of Common Core to the local level, ensuring that the right teachers and faculty are engaged in key conversations.

## Conclusion

In a recent speech to the Conference Board on the Mathematical Sciences, University System of Maryland Chancellor William “Brit” Kirwan said:

*Closing the gap between high school completion requirements and college entrance expectations is arguably the single most important thing to fix, if we are to address our college completion problem. I feel strongly that higher education must step forward and exercise leadership at this moment in time . . . A lot is at stake for our nation and the well-being of future generations. Much will depend on how we in higher education respond to the challenge and this moment of opportunity.*

Clearly, the Common Core State Standards present a great opportunity for education in general—and for higher education in particular. It is incumbent on faculty and administrators at institutions across the nation to seize this historic moment.

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## For More Information

The following sites provide access to the standards documents, assessment plans, and an array of additional information:

**[www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org)**: Official Common Core site, with access to the full standards documents and a map tracking state adoption.

**[www.achieve.org](http://www.achieve.org)**: A wealth of supplemental information, including comparison of the CCSS to American Diploma Project benchmarks.

**[www.achieve.org/PARCC/](http://www.achieve.org/PARCC/)**: Information on the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), one of two state consortia awarded Race to the Top funds to create assessments linked to the CCSS. Achieve was chosen by the PARCC states as its project management partner.

**[www.k12.wa.us/smarter/](http://www.k12.wa.us/smarter/)**: Information on the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium, the second Race to the Top grant recipient.

**[www.acenet.edu/programs/policy](http://www.acenet.edu/programs/policy)**: Materials from two webinars on CCSS for the higher education community.

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