

Partnering with K-12

Aligning Expectations

to Ensure College Readiness

TOOLKIT

HIGHER ED
for
HIGHER STANDARDS

FEBRUARY 2016

Introduction

Aligning Expectations

Dear Colleagues:

As we begin the new year, higher education leaders need to remain vigilant in our support of higher standards. Important gains that have been made in efforts to align K–12 standards and tests with college-ready expectations could be at risk as a growing number of states launch reviews and consider making changes to the standards and tests.

It is essential that higher education be at the table when these critical discussions are occurring, when recommendations are being weighed, and when decisions are being made.

The recent effort to raise academic expectations is the most promising reform in the K–12 sector in decades. If they are implemented wisely, these standards and their accompanying assessments can help ensure that more students arrive on our campuses prepared for college-level work and are on track from day one to earn a degree or certificate.

Higher education has played a significant role in shaping the high school assessments in many states, with the goal of building a college readiness measure we could use to improve the transition of students from high school to our campuses without the need for remediation. We also played an important role in shaping public perceptions of the new aligned tests when the initial scores were released this past summer and fall. Through our [Proficient Means Prepared campaign](#), higher education voices made a difference in 2015.

As states consider changes to their K–12 standards and assessments, our goal is to ensure that college readiness is a key criterion and that higher education leaders are part of the process. We encourage you to get involved.

Higher Ed for Higher Standards has developed a set of tools to support your work. One set of resources is focused on the standards, the other on the assessments — each with a series of possible scenarios and actions that higher education leaders can take in response.

Higher education leaders in a number of states already are participating. Thank you in advance for joining them. This is an important milestone in our collective efforts to help prepare more students for college, for careers, and for life.

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The Case for Higher Education’s Involvement

To ensure sufficient rigor, higher education needs to be involved.

Although the K–12 system has the lead in setting standards and selecting assessments, higher education’s involvement can make a critical difference. College-ready standards and aligned assessments are the foundation for the entire K–16 pipeline. They are the necessary underpinning of education reform, though not sufficient on their own to improve student outcomes.



Without adequate higher education involvement, standards may be set too low or not aligned with college expectations.

The data below demonstrate the consequences of such low expectations: poor student performance, high levels of remediation, and major misalignment between what it takes to graduate from high school and what it takes to succeed in college.

K–12 educators need input from experienced college faculty.

K–12 teachers want their students to be prepared for college, but despite their best intentions, they aren’t always up to date on what is truly expected of college students. Teachers need college faculty to engage with them to ensure that the K–12 standards are fully aligned to what students need to know and be able to do on day one as college freshmen.

Higher education can provide a real-world counter-balance.

In some cases, K–12 leaders will face increased pressures to lower the standards to make them “reachable” for more

students. By participating in the process and advocating for rigor, higher education can provide an important counter-pressure to keep standards appropriately high. Higher education is ideally positioned to offer a real-world perspective: prepare now or pay later.

Standards must have credibility with higher education to have an impact.

If higher education isn’t helping to establish standards for what it takes to graduate from high school and weighing in on the appropriateness of assessments, colleges are less likely to accept scores on the new high school tests as indicators of college readiness.

Involving higher education in the standards-setting process will foster greater collaboration with K–12 on many fronts.

Standards at Work (page 9) summarizes examples of collaboration in areas such as college access programs, dual enrollment, 12th grade bridge courses and other strategies for smoothing the transition from high school to college.

These new standards and assessments will open doors for students and provide them with greater opportunities, especially for traditionally underrepresented groups.

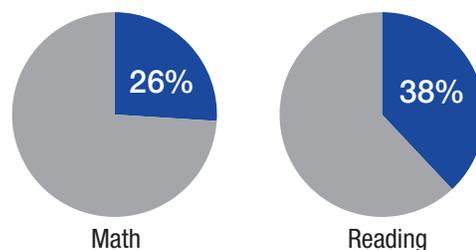
As the Higher Ed for Higher Standards coalition and many others have demonstrated, too many current high school graduates are not ready for college or careers. We need to close the preparation gap so that proficient in high school means truly prepared for college or work. Consider the current reality:

- Three-quarters of American students who take the ACT and achieve a high school diploma do not score “college-ready” across all four subject areas and may need remedial classes at both the university and community college levels.

- “Each year, more than 1 million students begin college in remediation – prerequisite coursework that costs states and students hundreds of millions of dollars but doesn’t count toward a degree,” according to a [Complete College America](#) report.
- U.S. high school students have fallen to 36th in math and 24th in reading among nations that administered the Programme for International Student Assessment in 2012.

- On the 2013 National Assessment of Educational Progress — known as the Nation’s Report Card — only 26 percent of 12th graders scored proficient or above in math, and just 38 percent did so in reading.
- Manufacturing executives report that six out of 10 positions remain unfilled due to the talent shortage, according to a 2015 [report by Deloitte](#).

Few 12th Graders Proficient on NAEP



Source: <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2014087>

Don’t focus only on the standards. Aligned assessments are an essential part of the “package.”

Colleges will pay attention to K–12 test scores — but *only if* the new tests are aligned to higher standards. If these new assessments measure college-ready skills, colleges and universities will increasingly use these scores to determine whether incoming students are ready for credit-bearing courses or need to take non-credit developmental courses to close gaps in their academic preparation.

More accurate placements will help higher education better support students so that they persist through college to earn

degrees and credentials. Early warnings from test scores will help close preparation gaps before enrollment.

If states water down their assessments, however, higher education will be confronted with the same dilemma it faces now: not being sure who arrives on campus prepared and who does not, and being forced to place too many incoming freshmen into remedial courses.

The [Proficient Means Prepared toolkit](#) includes additional data, plus information that you can use to create a customized report for your state.

- **Have your boards vote to recommend the new K–12 standards, assuming they are aligned with college expectations.** During the past few years, many system and state agency boards across the country (e.g., CA, CO, KY, MA, NY, TN) passed board resolutions in support of the aligned standards that their K–12 systems developed.

LEADING THE WAY

During the adoption of the Common Core State Standards, states such as CO, HI, KY, MA, OH, OR, TN, and WA designed and executed processes that engaged higher education faculty to ensure the standards met postsecondary expectations. This included workgroups that brought together faculty from key academic disciplines at two- and four-year institutions. They met over the course of several months to a year to review grade-level content within the standards.

Scenario 2: Selected Higher Education Representatives Are Invited to Participate

The K–12 system or governor appoints a few higher education representatives to serve on the larger committee charged with reviewing the standards and making recommendations. This is the most common scenario and it can be effective if there are enough higher education representatives and the right ones involved, and if the college readiness lens is applied during the review.

In this scenario, the challenges are ensuring (1) higher education voices have meaningful impact by supporting their claims with appropriate validation tools and (2) the participation of higher education members on the review committee appropriately represents academic content areas.

What higher education can do:

- **Advocate for a sufficient number of higher education representatives on the committee.** Ideal faculty workgroups include representatives from English language arts, mathematics, and other disciplines as deemed appropriate.
- **Position the SHEEO or state system leader to appoint or recommend the committee members.** If given the opportunity, choose wisely. Ensure that the higher education members selected to be on the committees have been active participants in alignment work, are well-acquainted with the current standards, and have a deep understanding of college readiness expectations on campuses.
- **Arm higher education panelists with tools/strategies for validating college readiness.** This may include the system office or state agency conducting an internal evaluation or review of the standards with higher education faculty to ensure that the representatives have a complete understanding from the field.

Scenario 3: Higher Education Is Not Invited to Participate

The state K–12 system establishes a process to review the standards, but higher education is *not* given a role. This is the worst-case scenario and unlikely to occur, but in such cases higher education can and should still engage.

What higher education can do:

- Continue building informal connections with K-12 to ensure higher education maintains open dialogue during the standards review process.
- Convene its own analysis of the standards using a college-ready lens.
- Publish a formal report of findings from higher education. The goal is to communicate higher education's formal opinion in an organized way to the leadership of K–12.
- Launch a communications plan to ensure the findings are given to the review committee, provided to the legislative education committees, and released to the public. Make the case that the standards must reflect college-ready expectations and the process must therefore include adequate participation by higher education experts.

Scenario 2: State Decides to Use Hybrid Assessments

Some states, such as Massachusetts, may consider combining questions from the consortia assessments with state-developed questions to form hybrid assessments. It will be critical that higher education play a role in that process to ensure the assessments remain robust enough to measure college readiness.

What higher education can do:

- **Work with K–12 officials to ensure that maintaining a college-ready indicator is a priority in the assessment revision process.** Offer higher education’s participation and leadership.
- **Work with K-12 to establish appropriate validation studies to ensure the high school assessments are strong indicators of college readiness.** The PARCC and Smarter Balanced consortia have been conducting such studies with their assessments. But if significant changes are made to those assessments, states may need to revisit the validity process.
- **Insist that the process include the establishment of a threshold that must be met by the assessment** (the right combination of rigorous assessment questions) to reliably indicate that students are college ready in mathematics and English language arts.
- **Place higher education faculty representatives on key K–12 assessment workgroups in charge of designing the new assessment system.**
- **Establish a communications plan to educate campus presidents, chief academic officers, and higher ed faculty and staff** how college- and career-ready standards and aligned assessments contribute to efforts to reduce remediation, improve graduation rates, and increase the proportion of the state’s citizens with a postsecondary credential.

Scenario 3: State Develops or Purchases Assessments

Some states are developing or purchasing their own high school assessments. Tennessee, for example, developed its own high school assessment to serve as a college-ready measure; while other states, such as Michigan and Arkansas, will use the SAT or ACT, respectively, as their statewide high school assessment. In these cases, it is very important that higher education engage in the development process and/or be involved in making the decision if the state purchases a test off the shelf. Ensuring the integrity and transparency of the college readiness indicator is of paramount importance.

What higher education can do:

- **Work quickly to ensure that higher education is effectively represented in whatever body will make decisions about the high school assessment.**
 - If the test is to be a measure of college readiness, then the state’s colleges must be at the table when decisions are made.
 - State higher education leaders should insist on selecting the individuals who are best able to represent the state’s colleges.
- **During the current contract window (typically one to three years),** execute an evaluation process of the range of high school testing options that measure college readiness, comparing the current assessment system with its ability to determine whether students will be successful in college credit-bearing coursework; and provide K–12 leaders with feedback in advance of the next round of decision-making.
- **When considering purchasing a new assessment,** invite higher education faculty to review sample tests and offer a formal opinion on the ability of the measure to serve as a college-ready indicator that can be used by colleges in placement decisions as well as by high schools in targeting curricular supports to students to enable them to reach college-ready performance levels before they graduate. Effective high school assessments must be well-aligned to college-ready standards and serve both of these purposes.
- **When building a new exam,** involve key higher education faculty in the design and development. Faculty should serve on the state technical advisory committee, on committees that establish the content and item specifications for the test, and on item review panels. Faculty also should play a key role in establishing the performance standards for the assessment so that they can be used to determine student readiness for credit-bearing courses.
- **Evaluate the predictive validity of the new assessment as a measure of college readiness.** This may involve commissioning an internal or external evaluation process; committing to track student performance data over time; and reporting back to K–12 on how students who have entered postsecondary institutions are performing in credit-bearing coursework.
- **Educate key decision-makers on how tests are used** in higher education for admission and placement. Use of tests has changed dramatically in higher education in recent years, and K–12 and policy leaders may make decisions based on outdated knowledge.
- **Agree to waive the placement test** for students who score college ready on the new assessment once that assessment has been shown to be associated with student success.

Standards at Work: Postsecondary Success

Many states have already begun using higher standards and aligned assessments to reshape how colleges, universities, and state higher education agencies organize, design, and execute policies and practices that establish stronger alignment with K–12. In the process, they are helping more students succeed.

For the first time, in states with high standards and aligned tests, higher education institutions can be confident that students who meet these expectations are academically prepared for entry-level, credit-bearing coursework in college.

For students who are not yet prepared, higher education is now in a better position to provide relevant support, working closely with colleagues in the K–12 sector.

All of this good work would be placed at risk if states back away from strong standards and aligned assessments.

Higher education is advancing the P–20 alignment agenda by leveraging higher standards in three key areas:



Precollege interventions to help students get ready for college by the time they graduate high school.

These include collaboration with K–12 school districts to design 12th grade bridge courses and support programs based on areas of student need revealed through the new college-ready assessments. For example:

Delaware is piloting a Foundations of College Math course that will guarantee placement into credit-bearing coursework in six institutions of higher education for any high school senior who passes. **Tennessee** designed a voluntary Bridge Mathematics course for students who have not scored a 19 or higher on the ACT by the beginning of their senior year. **West Virginia** legislation requires that all public high schools offer transitional courses for students who do not meet college readiness benchmarks. In **Washington**, math transition courses are triggered by a student's 11th grade Smarter Balanced score. **Colorado's** GEAR UP Early Remediation Pilot program allows partner middle and high school students to participate in online, self-paced English Language Arts (ELA) and math courses that mirror the content of the remedial courses offered in state colleges and universities.

Postsecondary placement practices to put incoming college students into appropriate courses and, consequently, on a path to persistence and completion.

This includes using the new high school assessments to determine if entering freshmen are ready for credit-bearing college courses. For example:

The California State University (CSU) system, a national leader in this area, supplemented the state's former 11th grade math and ELA/literacy exams with a small number of additional items to measure students' readiness for credit-bearing courses. CSU also partnered with K–12 to develop 12th grade bridge courses for students who needed extra support before high school graduation and offered professional learning workshops for educators.

More than 220 colleges and universities in seven states will honor **Smarter Balanced** scores as college-ready indicators (California, Delaware, Hawaii, Nevada, Oregon, South Dakota, Washington).

States in the **PARCC** assessment consortium also are preparing to use scores on the high school assessments as indicators of college readiness. Systems or institutions in three states (Arkansas, Colorado, and Illinois) have adopted such policies to date. Massachusetts and New Jersey also are considering the issue.

Postsecondary freshman-year experiences to align secondary and higher education content and support students' transition into credit-bearing coursework.

Efforts include improving counseling, providing co-requisite remediation, and changing credit-bearing course sequences, consistent with the more ambitious expectations embedded in the new K–12 standards. For example:

In **Indiana**, Ivy Tech Community College and the Lumina Foundation for Education have created a one-year accelerated associate degree program. In **West Virginia**, Mountwest Community & Technical College provides multiple approaches to co-requisite remediation, including fall bootcamps to get students ready for college-level math courses. The **State University of New York (SUNY)** recently

committed to offer the Quantway and Statway programs to all of its 30 community colleges and any four-year campuses over the next three years. These programs have proven successful in the pilot phase with 57% of students in Quantway completing their developmental math requirements in one semester and 52% of Statway students receiving college credit in one year. The **Community College of Baltimore County** in Maryland allows the majority of students who did not pass the writing placement test to enroll in both English 101 and a companion course that provides extra support. **Austin Peay State University** in Tennessee replaced its two remedial math courses with enhanced sections of its two gateway college-level mathematics courses.

More detailed examples can be found in our [Proficient Means Prepared toolkit](#).

**For more information, visit
higheredforhigherstandards.org/aligningexpectations**

