

# Adopting New College- and Career-Ready Assessments

## I. Why Are New College- and Career-Ready Assessments Necessary?

### Why should K-12 and higher education systems be aligned regarding new assessments?

Since 2010, the vast majority of states—motivated by the desire to ensure that students are prepared for college and career by the time they complete high school—have adopted new academic content standards in English language arts (ELA)/literacy and mathematics. These new college- and career-ready standards mean little without a yardstick to determine how students are faring. Providing that yardstick is the role, in part, of assessment systems that exist in every state.

Traditionally, colleges and universities paid scant attention to state K-12 assessment results for good reason: The results did not provide a reliable indicator of college readiness and could not be used to determine placement in credit-bearing coursework. Even when assessments were a condition for high school graduation, states often set proficiency cut scores at or below 10th-grade levels, and the results had little or no bearing on postsecondary placement or admission decisions.<sup>1</sup> As a result, colleges and universities continued to use a variety of basic skills or placement tests, which informed their placement decisions. In many states there is wide variability among institutions about what scores constitute college ready. Not only were K-12 assessment results highly variable and unusable, colleges and universities sent inconsistent signals to students and K-12 educators about what it meant to be prepared for college.

Across the country, the movement by dozens of states toward college- and career-ready standards and aligned assessments is upending this long-standing pattern. States are betting that the alignment between the new standards and new assessments—and the quality of the assessments themselves—will provide the opportunity for K-12 and higher education systems to approach the task of ensuring college and career readiness jointly. The sectors are working together as never before with assessment developers on the quality of test items that authenticate college and career readiness and on determining the performance levels (or “cut scores”) needed for placement into credit-bearing, first-year courses without remediation.

### WHAT ARE THE KEY ELEMENTS OF AN ALIGNMENT AGENDA?

This is the third in a series of briefs that provide an introduction to important areas for K-12/higher education collaboration and alignment. Each brief includes basic information, practical advice, vignettes based on real state experiences and a list of resources for additional information. The other briefs are:

- BRIEF 1: Achieving the Benefits of K-12/Higher Education Alignment.
- BRIEF 2: Defining College and Career Readiness.
- BRIEF 4: Developing and Using College Readiness Courses.
- BRIEF 5: Aligning Gateway College Courses.
- BRIEF 6: Redesigning Educator Preparation Programs.



*K-12/higher education alignment is essential to state and institutional efforts to improve both college and career readiness and postsecondary completion. This series of briefs, exploring a host of alignment issues, is intended for K-12 and higher education policymakers, administrators, practitioners and advocates. The briefs draw on the experience of leading states working on alignment between these two sectors primarily through the national networks of [Core to College](#) and the [College and Career Readiness Partnership](#).*

## What is the K–12 assessment landscape?

It is difficult to overstate how much the ground has shifted for K–12 and higher education regarding state assessments—and how much it keeps moving. As recently as 2009, all states developed or at least adopted their own approaches to K–12 testing, generally relying on one of the many private research firms and publishers serving these markets. But changes came rapidly and are continuing. By 2011, 45 states and the District of Columbia had agreed to participate in one of the two consortia of states developing new, higher quality assessments. However, political considerations prompted many states to rethink their decisions. By 2015, the pendulum swung back as some states began pulling out of the consortia and returned to developing their own individual assessments. The assessment marketplace remains in flux as states weigh whether to stay in one of the two consortia or take a different path:

**State assessment consortia:** In 2010, two national consortia of states—the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (Smarter Balanced)—received federal funding to develop high-quality assessments aligned to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in ELA/literacy and mathematics. The number of states in each consortium giving the test during 2014–15 has fallen (from 26 to 11 states in PARCC and from 21 to 18 states in Smarter Balanced) as elected officials in some states heed constituents' calls for locally developed tests. Some states, such as Louisiana, are administering PARCC exams in elementary and middle grades only, while others, like North Carolina, maintain their membership in Smarter Balanced but are abstaining from administering the exams while state leaders explore other opportunities.

**College admissions tests:** Research by the two dominant college admissions testing organizations, ACT and College Board (creator of the SAT), has long documented the large gap between typical high school preparation and what students actually need to know and be able to do to be ready for college-level coursework. Accordingly, both companies are making changes to their tests in the coming years that some commentators say will make them more in step with college-ready standards. (The SAT, for instance, will ask students to back up their answers with evidence and solve multistep word problems, mirroring some of the CCSS' instructional shifts.<sup>2</sup>) Both testing organizations have various products for lower grades, although not to the extent of the two consortia assessment systems. ACT also partnered with Pearson to create ACT Aspire, a test for grades 3–8 and high school that is designed to assess the CCSS and is meant as

an alternative to the PARCC and Smarter Balanced tests.<sup>3</sup> (It is separate from ACT's college-entrance exam.) As of early 2015, five states administered the ACT college-entrance exam as their high school assessment, and one state planned on using ACT Aspire in high school, although how universities in those states will use the results for placement will vary.<sup>4</sup>

**State-developed assessments:** As of March 2015, 19 states were part of neither consortium, opting to design their own tests. These states have to ensure alignment to their own standards and engage their higher education institutions in validating that assessments appropriately gauge college readiness. Texas, for example, initiated development of its own college readiness standards and assessments several years before the CCSS. Kentucky uses state-created tests at the lower grades and the ACT college-entrance exam in high school. Another four states retained their consortium memberships but opted to design their own tests for the 2014–15 school year.<sup>5</sup>



### Comparison of PARCC, Smarter Balanced and ACT Aspire

|   | PARCC   | Smarter Balanced  | ACT Aspire   |
|---|---|---|--|
| <b>Subjects tested</b>                        | English language arts (ELA)/ literacy, including writing, and math  | ELA/literacy, including writing, and math   | English, reading, writing, math and science  |
| <b>Number of member/ participating states</b> | 11 participating states and D.C. administering PARCC in 2014–15<br><br>New York is a governing PARCC state but is not administering PARCC in 2014–15. | 18 participating states administering Smarter Balanced in 2014–15<br><br>Iowa, North Carolina and Wyoming are affiliate states but are not administering Smarter Balanced in 2014–15. | 2 states administering ACT Aspire  |
| <b>Summative assessments</b>                  | Each grade 3–11   | Each grade 3–8 and 11   | Each grade 3–8 and 9 or 10 (“early high school”); does not include the ACT college admissions test |
| <b>Optional, nonsummative assessments</b>     | Grades K–2 formative<br><br>Grades 3–11 speaking and listening, diagnostic and mid-year assessments   | Grades 3–12 interim assessments, and formative assessment resources for teacher use   | Grades 3–12 classroom-based (five-item tests) and periodic (interim) assessments                   |
| <b>Use of performance tasks</b>               | Summative performance-based ELA/literacy and math assessments in each grade 3–11  | Performance tasks included in summative and interim ELA/ literacy and math assessments in each grade 3–8 and 11   | Includes constructed-response items and brief writing exercises but no extended performance tasks  |

As the assessment landscape shifts, states have seized the opportunity to create collaborative structures and networks to encourage greater K–12 and higher education engagement in the alignment and use of these new tests. At the same time, the two assessment consortia have involved higher education extensively in item development and review panels; standard-setting and achievement-level decisions; and the development of libraries of assessment items, performance tasks, and instructional and professional development resources for teachers. In a growing number of states, these new, more collaborative structures and practices are an essential step toward higher education institutions agreeing to use or incorporate high school assessment results into placement policies and practices at their campuses (already taking place at 50 institutions across PARCC states and another 201 across Smarter Balanced states).

Two big challenges lie ahead. First, as assessment results in Kentucky, New York and Tennessee already have demonstrated, higher standards and more rigorous assessments mean that greater proportions of 11th graders will be found not yet college ready. States have warned teachers and families to expect such results given the higher bar students face, particularly during the initial years of implementation and use. Many states, including Delaware and Maryland, have created “hold harmless” provisions or delayed the point at which assessments can be used for student or school accountability and educator evaluations.

A second big challenge is that the new standards and assessments will take time to validate in a real-world environment. Although the two consortia started developing their assessments in 2010 and underwent national field tests in spring 2014, the assessment results cannot be validated to confirm that high-scoring students are succeeding in credit-bearing courses for several years. As the research firm WestEd (evaluator of the Core to College network) noted, such validation studies may slow down the use of results for placement.<sup>6</sup> Still, that has not deterred hundreds of institutions from modifying placement policies to accommodate the new assessments and working on data-sharing agreements with K–12 systems while leaving the door open to changes pending validation results.

## II. Practical Advice on Using the New Assessments To Support K–12/Higher Education Alignment

A number of states have engaged in efforts to achieve greater higher education involvement in the development of new assessments and greater alignment around how the assessments are used. The following advice, based on the experiences of some of these leading states, can inform and support those seeking to promote such efforts in their own states.

### 1. Use assessment results for planning the 12th-grade year.

The responsibility of ensuring college and career readiness no longer can rest with K–12 systems alone. In the past, states and districts set one expectation of college and career readiness for students through high school graduation requirements, course planning and course content. Meanwhile, higher education institutions set different expectations, as defined by entry-level course content and placement exams.

The gap between expectations of the two systems is stark: More than 50 percent of high school graduates who enter two-year colleges and 20 percent of graduates who enter four-year institutions still need remedial classes in core subjects to prepare for college-level work.<sup>7</sup> With common standards and assessments, states now have the opportunity to be transparent with educators, students and families about not only what it takes to enter college but also what students must do to place into and succeed in credit-bearing college courses.

Students taking the new assessments will learn their college readiness status in 11th grade. Based on their results, they may need extra support to ensure a productive 12th-grade year. K–12 teachers and higher education faculty can collaborate on planning 12th-grade course-taking maps for 11th graders who are not college or career ready (according to the assessments and other data) to help them prepare for first-year college courses. And higher education faculty and K–12 teachers can collaborate on designing 12th-grade courses that meet college readiness expectations, as is occurring in seven Smarter Balanced states (California, Delaware, Hawaii, Nevada, South Dakota, Washington and West

Virginia).<sup>8</sup> This effort is similar to what California has done for years through its Early Assessment Program as part of the California State University System. Indeed, some states and assessment developers, including the two consortia and ACT Aspire, aim to have their score reports provide information about whether students are moving toward college readiness well before 11th grade. (Read more about college readiness courses in **Brief 4** of this series.)

On the flip side, for a student who exceeds college readiness by the end of 11th grade, higher education institutions can offer dual enrollment or other opportunities to accelerate learning, such as taking a college class for credit in the 12th-grade year. All 50 states have dual enrollment policies, though they vary in scope, cost to the student and program quality.<sup>9</sup>

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### 2. Use assessment results for postsecondary course placement.

The most significant use of assessment results by higher education is to determine if students need remediation and to place students in the correct course commensurate with their abilities. Given the importance of this function, one would think that current placement tests must be highly reliable and valid. Research shows, in fact, that the most commonly used placement assessments are not particularly effective. In one study, researchers found that one commonly used assessment leads to significant overplacement and underplacement mistakes.<sup>10</sup>

But change is hard. Higher education institutions can be reluctant to let go of current, but known, practices in favor of lesser known alternatives. Fortunately, a number of states, including California, Hawaii, Illinois, Oregon and Washington, have taken on the challenge of incorporating the new and more rigorous high school assessments into placement policies. Such policies signal preliminarily that the new assessments are at least as good as if not better than current approaches. The policies also demonstrate the value that higher education places on the assessment results and send a consistent statewide message to students and parents about what is required to be placed into college courses.

Key to modifying placement policy is the involvement of higher education stakeholders at the front end. Working groups or committees of higher education faculty, registrars, administrators, state assessment leaders and K–12 representatives can become deeply acquainted with the new assessments and understand their value in gauging readiness. They can work out the many technical details for exactly how the assessments will be incorporated into placement policies. When Illinois community college presidents agreed to use PARCC scores to determine course placement at their institutions, they worked with the Illinois State Board of Education as well as the Illinois Community College Chief Academic Officers, Illinois Council of Community College Chief Student Services Officers and the Board of the Illinois Mathematics Association of Community Colleges.<sup>11</sup>

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States also are considering the merits of establishing consistent statewide "remediation-free" placement policies. Students, and the counselors who advise them, should not have to sort through a myriad of different requirements from one institution to the next to understand what is required to enter college remediation free. States like Colorado and Ohio already have policies that apply to all public higher education institutions. Consistent policies about what constitutes "remediation free" do not affect individual schools' unique admissions policies. Statewide placement policies help to reinforce a state's college and career readiness definition and provide a consistent signal to students about what they must achieve.

Smarter Balanced set its cut score for college readiness in 2014, and PARCC will follow suit in 2015, likely enabling more institutions in PARCC states to adopt aligned placement policies. The new assessments, however, are not meant to provide fine-grained information about course suitability for incoming freshmen. Institutions may therefore choose to use the assessment results as a preliminary "cut": Those scoring above college ready will be placed in credit-bearing courses but may be required to take further placement tests to determine the level of course in which they will be placed (e.g., college algebra or advanced first-year calculus).

A bigger question yet to be answered is how, for example, a PARCC state with a PARCC-aligned placement policy will use an out-of-state student's Smarter Balanced score for placement. This is known as "comparability": Will a college-ready score of "5" on the PARCC exam, with five levels, mean the same thing as a college-ready score of "4" on the Smarter Balanced test, which has four levels? States and the consortia have been discussing this issue for a few years, but no official agreement has emerged.

### **3. Jointly communicate to inform expectations for assessment outcomes.**

New assessments generate a lot of anxiety when they are introduced. They often generate even more anxiety when the first scores are released. As reported in research by Achieve (a nonprofit that advocates for higher standards and aligned assessments), many states' tests provide misleading representations about whether students are proficient.<sup>12</sup> The new assessments will be more accurate and will show that more students are not well prepared. But as new academic standards continue to be implemented and the education system becomes more familiar with the new assessments, scores will go up. K–12 and higher education can collaborate to develop and implement a communications plan for the general public, policymakers and key stakeholders that helps to establish realistic expectations about what test scores are likely to show—and what they mean. Prior to administering new assessments, Kentucky communicated an estimate that proficiency rates would drop by 36 percentage points.<sup>13</sup> The state was able to claim success when actual scores showed a drop of only 30 points. By communicating early and deliberately, and emphasizing that staying the course will ultimately lead to more students reaching a truly proficient level, Kentucky was able to minimize the anxiety over the first reported results of the state's new assessments.

### **4. Develop appropriate and secure cross-sector data-sharing agreements.**

States have come a long way in the last decade with data sharing across K–12, higher education and workforce development agencies. In many states, however, rules and regulations continue to make viewing K–12 student data, such as assessment results, difficult for higher education institutions, even when those results have direct bearing on

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postsecondary decision-making. For effective data sharing across the sectors, K–12 and higher education institutions should negotiate a transparent process by which higher education institutions can see their own incoming students' state assessment results and 12th-grade course-taking information while following federal rules and all relevant privacy restrictions. Postsecondary institutions would then be able to use assessment results as part of their placement decisions, streamlining the process for students. Such broad sharing is possible through organizations that house and analyze the data, such as the Hawaii P–20 Partnerships for Education, the state's P–20 council.

Higher education institutions, although not necessarily community colleges, already have access to vast amounts of data on their incoming students—transcripts, college-entrance exam scores and Advanced Placement/International Baccalaureate results, among other sources—to help determine course placement. State assessment results that are part of an aligned system of standards and assessments should be no different. In addition, access to a state college readiness exam score within a student's college profile will be essential for conducting validity research for assessment results. By linking student progress in college courses with state assessment scores, states and institutions will know whether those exams predicted student readiness accurately.

#### 5. Participate in cross-sector validity research.

Forthcoming research by the two national assessment consortia will be more general than what states, with their own data, can produce. This space is ripe with opportunity for additional research that could guide more student-specific intervention strategies. Earlier this year, the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences announced grants of up to \$5 million for states and partners (colleges or research firms) to study the effect of college- and career-ready standards and assessments.

Higher education and K–12 systems can create agreements to set up in-state validation studies (perhaps led by higher education research centers) to investigate the many questions that the use of new assessments brings to mind. The most obvious one is whether students' high school assessment scores truly predict college readiness. Other questions include: What kinds of course combinations in 12th grade work best to increase college readiness? Are high school students who score at a college-ready level and go into dual enrollment succeeding in their postsecondary courses? In which postsecondary courses are college-ready students most successful? Where are they continuing to struggle?

### III. Actions in States: Washington State

#### Bringing higher education to the assessment table

Washington state is an unlikely candidate for illustrating higher education engagement and alignment with K–12 on preparation for new assessments. Public higher education in Washington is decentralized, with a gubernatorially appointed board for the state's community and technical colleges, a P–20 coordinating agency called the Washington Student Achievement Council, and six four-year institutions run by their own boards. The state's Transition Math Project, college readiness math test and system placement reciprocity agreement gave leaders a foundation from which to coordinate, according to Bill Moore, who serves as the Core to College alignment director for the State Board for Community & Technical Colleges. But it was relatively new to have an agreement among all colleges to use a single common assessment, Smarter Balanced, to inform placement.

Part of Moore's charge was to secure agreement from two- and four-year colleges and universities to use students' results on their 11th-grade Smarter Balanced tests to inform their placement in credit-bearing, first-year courses. He began by forming a steering committee of leaders from key statewide K–12 and higher education organizations to introduce the idea and gather support at the state policy level. Next, a 50-member faculty steering committee (25 from mathematics and 25 from ELA, with additional K–12 experts on the CCSS) came together to do a "deep dive" into the standards and the Smarter Balanced assessment to build the case from an academic perspective. Finally, a smaller, 20-person group of higher education and state policy stakeholders helped draft a placement agreement.

All three groups not only helped spread the word about the standards and Smarter Balanced in their own organizations and campuses, but they also helped Moore identify and avoid land mines where support lagged. When Moore visited campuses and spoke with faculty, he referred to the work of the three committees—particularly the 50-person faculty committee—to reassure skeptics that faculty and higher education policymakers around the state were assisting with the effort.

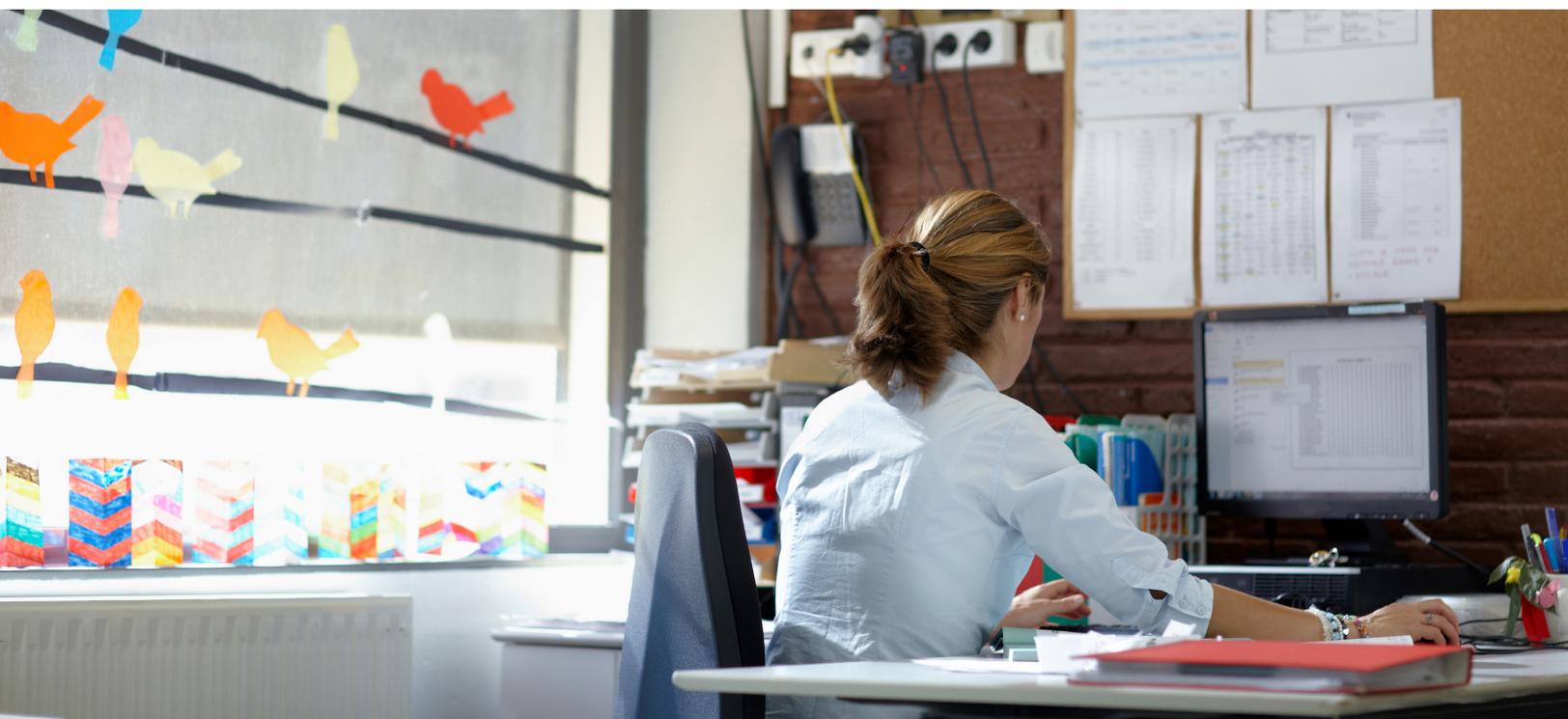
In May 2014, the State Board for Community & Technical Colleges approved the use of assessment scores to inform placement into credit-bearing, first-year courses in their institutions, beginning with the class of 2016. (The policy will be reconsidered in 2018 on the basis of student performance data.) In October, the state's four-year institutions followed suit, including all but one of the private institutions. Washington is one of seven states in the Smarter Balanced consortium to have such placement policies (the others are California, Delaware, Hawaii, Nevada, Oregon and South Dakota). Moore sees the adoption of the placement agreement in Washington as a first step to increasing alignment between K–12 and higher education. Further steps may include curriculum alignment between high school and college-level courses and/or improving developmental education.

### What Washington learned: takeaways to date

Moore said he tried to **"overcommunicate" by tailoring messages to different campuses and understanding the different needs and cultures** of two- and four-year institutions regarding placement. One key difference that affected his approach was that remediation is less of an issue at four-year colleges than at two-year colleges. In addition, Moore found that even though he felt he had spread the word about the placement policy, some campuses still were surprised at having to sign off on a statement committing them to the work.

Some higher education faculty in Washington also worried that tying college course placement to an 11th-grade assessment score would weaken what universities offered first-year students. But having a **committee composed entirely of faculty and K–12 experts in the CCSS** who had studied the standards and assessments deeply helped counter opposition. This committee became the voice of faculty and K–12 teachers about the value of the standards and assessments.

**Leveraging existing relationships** also helped build support. Previous projects in transition mathematics courses, for example, or statewide gatherings of district K–12 superintendents and community college presidents, served as opportunities for leaders who had worked together on other issues to come together once again to discuss assessment and placement.



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## Resources

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