



State Capacity for Leadership:
Ensuring Meaningful Higher Education Involvement in
State Implementation of New Assessments Aligned
with the Common Core State Standards

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Introduction

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and assessments aligned to them represent a significant milestone in public education reform in the U.S. Developed with consultation from higher education, the rigorous new standards and the assessments now being drafted by two consortia promise to help students reach higher levels of academic achievement and increase their likelihood of enrolling and succeeding in college.

The mission of the consortia is to create assessments that reflect the CCSS and accurately measure college readiness. This work could lead to significant improvements in the preparation of many students for postsecondary study and smooth their transition between high school and college. Higher education systems stand to benefit as well since better preparation should reduce the high proportion of students requiring developmental courses when they enroll, limit the costs associated with those classes, and cut the average time to a credential. Achieving those results, however, will require the support of higher education not only throughout the development of the exams but also into their full implementation.

As a first step toward encouraging higher education systems to endorse and base judgments about students' college readiness on the new assessments, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and Lumina Foundation requested the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) to identify the conditions that help build consensus between K-12 and postsecondary systems at a state level. In response, NCHEMS developed the following:

- ***Criteria Reflecting Capacity for Alignment:*** NCHEMS identified a set of characteristics that increase the likelihood a state will be able to gain broad acceptance and consistent application of the CCSS and aligned assessments within the higher education sector. Researchers then tested these criteria against actual state conditions based both on site visits and new data.
- ***Hallmarks of Higher Education Involvement:*** Using the criteria, NCHEMS offers recommendations for meaningful state-level involvement by higher education in the implementation of the CCSS and assessments.

This paper summarizes the criteria and describes how they play out in the context of specific state environments. It is designed as a guide to help educators and policymakers understand the conditions that must be met for a state to fully embrace the goals of the new Common Core State Standards and related assessments.

Criteria for Gauging State Capacity for Higher Education Involvement in CCSS and Assessments

The fundamental design of the CCSS and aligned assessments is anchored in two principles:

- The standards reflect the progression of knowledge and skills that students need to acquire at the K-12 level in order to be ready for college; and
- The assessments serve to measure whether students are on track toward and, ultimately, reach college readiness.

If the CCSS and assessments accurately reflect these principles, then it stands to reason that states would do well to build a consensus between the K-12 and higher education sectors on how the standards and related tests can be used to track and support improved student outcomes. In turn, students and parents are more likely to embrace this demanding approach to education when it is commonly viewed as the best pathway to postsecondary and career success.

Consensus requires two key elements – ***broad acceptance*** and ***consistent application***. Broad acceptance reflects the recognition by most institutions statewide of the value of the CCSS and assessments in defining and measuring college readiness. Consistent application means all of those institutions are prepared to use the assessment results to determine whether a student is ready to take the first level of college credit bearing courses.

NCHEMS identified the following characteristics that increase the likelihood a state will be able to gain broad acceptance and consistent application within its higher education sector. At the outset, NCHEMS recognized that few, if any, states would meet all criteria. Those that exhibited a substantial number of these characteristics, however, would be best positioned to lead efforts to align K-12 and higher education around the CCSS and assessments.

1. ***State Level Policy Leadership of Post-Secondary Education:*** The state has a coordination/governance structure that provides policy leadership for all of postsecondary education, and, ideally, adult education. The stronger the statewide policy leadership the more conducive it is to broad acceptance and consistent application.
2. ***Statewide Experience in Post-Secondary Policy Change:*** The state has the capacity to make changes in policy and practice affecting the academic functions of colleges and universities statewide. At the same time, it has a track record that indicates its infrastructure can support the processes necessary to reach broad acceptance and consistent application. Such policy change experience can be evidenced by leadership on a variety of cross-institutional policy topics such as:
 - Development of admissions criteria for different types of institutions
 - Development of common college readiness standards
 - Policy regarding common and consistent placement exams that also set cutoff scores for mandatory placement in developmental education
 - New approaches to delivering developmental education
 - Statewide articulation and transfer arrangements
 - ⇒ An agreed upon general education core
 - ⇒ Transferable courses that count toward a major program of study in a specific subject
 - Curricula and course redesign, especially for entry-level credit bearing courses
 - Multi-institution collaboration on delivery of courses/programs
 - Reform of teacher education curricula.
3. ***Cross-Sector Collaboration Experience:*** The state has a successful track record of collaboration between higher education and K-12 education, showing familiarity with processes and an infrastructure necessary to build consensus between the two sectors. Such successful collaboration can be evidenced by a variety of cross-sector activities such as:
 - Active involvement by higher education in a P-20 council that is characterized by the following:
 - ⇒ Having an action agenda
 - ⇒ Undertaking tasks that effect higher education as well as K-12
 - Alignment of K-12 goals with postsecondary education practice, for example:
 - ⇒ College prep curricula as gatekeeper for state student financial aid

- ⇒ Effective arrangements for accelerated programs (dual credit, Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB))
- Sharing of data – high school feedback reports and collaborative efforts to address issues revealed by these data.
- Active involvement by higher education in the development of K-12 assessments with the purpose of clearly articulating expectations for college readiness.

Observations regarding application of criteria to current state practice

As NCHEMS went through the process of testing the draft criteria through site visits and consultation with stakeholders, they developed a number of deeper observations about what can drive a state’s capacity to align K-12 and higher education on policy issues.

1. **The state has a coordination/governance structure that provides policy leadership for all postsecondary education, including community colleges, four-year institutions and, ideally, adult education.**

It is important for a state to have a higher education structure that can be a consistent and reliable partner for the state education agency and the K-12 system in developing collaborative initiatives. Currently fewer than half the states have higher education coordinating or governing structures for the public sector overall. In the remaining half, state-level governance responsibility is divided among two or more entities. Of particular significance is the governance of community colleges since these campuses tend to be the “open access” points of a state’s higher education system.

States with high levels of local control and fragmented governance of community colleges face a particularly difficult challenge in developing the policies needed for systemic engagement of higher education. In contrast, states with strong community college systems have a platform from which to pursue statewide initiatives, such as linking community colleges with school districts on a regional basis but within a larger policy framework.

The distressed economy has posed additional challenges to the effectiveness and capacity of state coordinating agencies and system offices. Faced with deep budget cuts, they tend to focus resources on internal priorities and staff reductions, which often leads to reduced capacity for new initiatives.

Postsecondary education agencies that have proved most effective in providing consistent, statewide policy leadership share several traits. These are:

- **Leadership at the Executive and Board levels:** Effective collaboration can only happen if key organizational leaders are committed to reaching workable outcomes. In the long run, consistent support from senior leadership at the level of the board and chief executive is essential for systemic change.
- **Education Attainment Mission:** The higher education agency should have a mission focused on meeting the postsecondary education needs of the state’s entire population, and raising education attainment levels. To the extent that agencies are still focused on traditional oversight and regulatory functions, they may not have the credibility or staff capacity needed to lead statewide change strategies, such as engaging the higher education community in the work of implementing the new assessments.

- ***Institutional and Regional Differentiation:*** The higher education system should identify as a priority the pursuit of strategies reflecting differences among regions of the state in terms of demographic and economic conditions, workforce needs, educational attainment, and postsecondary education participation. To be effective, it is especially important for states to promote strategies that link all postsecondary education sectors serving a region with efforts to improve postsecondary preparation, participation, and completion for the region's population.
- ***Linkage and Connection to Private Postsecondary Institutions:*** The higher education system should demonstrate a commitment to include private colleges and universities in planning and policy initiatives aimed at improving completion and increasing education levels. In many states, the private postsecondary education sector is an important source of educational opportunity, degree production in critical fields, and transfer opportunities for community college students. Yet, less than half of the states have structures that formally include the independent sector in their planning and policy development.
- ***Inclusion of Adult Education:*** In many states, the largest proportion of students who need developmental education are those who have been out of high school for more than a year. These students range from young adults who dropped out of high school to older adults who find themselves unemployed and needing to upgrade their basic skills. While much of the discussion about implementation of the CCSS and new assessments focuses on traditional-age students, educational programs and strategies that address the needs of these other groups also must be focused on college-readiness. They too should be aligned to the CCSS and, possibly, the new assessments. The revision of the GED to align with the new assessments is an important development to support this state-level work.

Among the states visited by NCHEMS, only Kentucky is deliberately focused on how to reach and ensure higher levels of college and career readiness preparation for adults and high school dropouts. Again, this is an issue of governance in some states, where the agency responsible for adult education is not linked to either elementary and secondary education or higher education.

Informal networks, supported by non-governmental organizations (e.g., associations of community colleges, or of public universities) also play important roles in complementing formal structures. In some cases, they stand in for formal structures where none exists. Where these informal networks exist, they can be strong allies in alignment work.

It is worth emphasizing that even states with a strong coordinating or governing structure face challenges in meeting the above criteria. Many still have not made the transition from their original primary role in coordinating and regulating institutions to a broader role of leading a public agenda. Several have experienced budget cutbacks that have reduced their capacity to support cross-sector linkages. In some instances senior leadership turnover has slowed the momentum of key collaborations. State level coordination alone is not sufficient. The challenge is to demonstrate real policy leadership.

2. The state has the capacity for making statewide changes in higher education policy and practice as well as a track record of success.

It makes a difference to have a state higher education agency with experience in successfully leading statewide changes in policy and practice on academic functions of colleges and universities. Agencies that have experienced success in working with provosts and faculty teams across the state on common issues have established relationships that provide the foundation for CCSS and assessment alignment. Efforts to develop strong statewide articulation and transfer policies, for example, inevitably draw faculty into deep discussions about curriculum, student

performance and learning outcomes. These faculty often go on to become the strongest champions of the new systems developed with their participation. They also can be tapped as focal points for the type of faculty engagement essential to successful K-12/higher education alignment work.

This point is well illustrated by Kentucky. After working with faculty across the system on a common general education core for transfer purposes, the state found it had a ready pool of individuals who could be engaged in deliberations about alignment with the CCSS and the new assessments. Without this sort of experience and capacity, states face a challenge in engaging faculty in a manner that will affect the system as a whole—as opposed to single institutions or sectors.

Other types of collaborative endeavors also can contribute to identification of a core of faculty interested in, and willing to engage in, alignment work. Good examples include initiatives to redesign entry-level courses or efforts to transition to “competency based” approaches to granting course credit. Such issues foster deep engagement in policy questions and offer opportunities for state agencies to build credibility and trust among provosts and faculty.

In some states, it has been difficult to engage the provosts and arts and sciences faculty of major research universities in formal deliberations about improving college readiness. Typically the deans and faculty of schools of education are more likely to be the ones involved from these institutions. The need for broader engagement, however, is important to building stronger buy-in from these very important higher education actors.

While the goal should be to find ways to effectively engage these higher profile institutions, some states may have to move ahead with leaders from “access” institutions – especially community colleges and regional universities – as the initial participants. Research universities can be engaged through the participation of key individual faculty members (e.g., from math and English), the deans and faculty of schools of education, academic leaders involved in reform of undergraduate education, and staff members responsible for assessment of student learning, student advising, and academic support services.

3. The state has a successful track record of collaboration between higher education and K-12 education.

It is not uncommon to find examples of higher education engaging with local school districts through the involvement of individual institutions, schools of education, or faculty members. However, there is a big difference between such isolated examples of collaboration and systemic, statewide involvement coordinated through a state higher education entity. A state’s successful experience in developing and implementing shared policies for the K-12 and higher education sectors at the system level is a strong indicator of its likelihood of success in alignment work. Evidence of collaboration may be found in a number of areas including:

- ***Shared assessments:*** Some states, most notably California, already have engaged in discussions across all sectors around the use of common college placement assessments and the setting of cut off scores (e.g., in end-of-course assessments) that define “college readiness.” However, many states give the responsibility for deciding on assessments and cut off scores to individual institutions or divide that responsibility between two or more systems. Without a statewide platform for making such decisions, there is no natural venue for considering alignment of college placement tests with the CCSS and new assessments.
- ***Early assessment and identification strategies:*** Another area of collaboration that is a logical lead-in to alignment around the CCSS and assessments is the development of statewide strategies for early assessment of students in high school and for providing supplemental

instruction for those identified as not on track for college readiness. There are good examples throughout the country of individual institutions that are working with their feeder high schools to offer early assessments and collaborating on supplemental instruction for students. To have a systemic impact, though, there should be a statewide policy framework and strategy for these early interventions.

- ***Dual enrollment:*** States with systemic strategies supporting dual enrollment as a means to engage higher education in improving the preparation of high school students have a natural foundation for a conversation on implementing the CCSS and new assessments. Here again, individual relationships between higher education institutions and nearby high schools are prevalent, but there can be huge variations among such arrangements within any given state. A real statewide strategy wrestles with issues of equitable access, common financing approaches, and consistent quality of the academic experience. A state's successful efforts in developing statewide guidelines and oversight mechanisms for dual enrollment can set the stage for other types of cross-sector conversations with the K-12 community.
- ***Teacher and principal preparation:*** The collaborative development of statewide strategies for human resource development aligned with the CCSS and new assessments also can lay a strong foundation for deeper collaborations around standards and assessments. To the extent that the state education department or state educator standards board is engaged in a fundamental redesign of teacher preparation and training, teacher and leader certification requirements and program approval requirements for schools of education, there is a natural platform for connecting with higher education in implementing the CCSS and new assessments. But if there is no higher education agency with program review and approval authority as well as the capacity to lead reform of teacher and school leader preparation, the state does not have a consistent statewide partner to work with K-12 in this area.

What does meaningful higher education involvement look like?

The criteria discussed above describe the key characteristics, experiences, and capacities likely to lead to the effective engagement of higher education in CCSS and assessment alignment activities. Below is a compilation of the best practices in this field that NCHEMS found in leading states around the country.

Multi-level strategy and commitment

It is clear that states are in the early stages of understanding the breadth and depth of commitment required for full engagement of higher education in implementing the new assessments—and creating a truly comprehensive strategy to improve college and career readiness. When asked how they are engaged in implementing the new assessments, some states immediately cite the involvement of schools and colleges of education in efforts to reform teacher preparation programs. Still, they do not make the connections to a wider range of intersections with the K-12 system. What is required is a multi-level strategy involving commitments and engagement across the system, including, but not limited to:

- Commitments at the highest levels of state government: the governor and key legislative leaders
- Strong leadership and active collaboration between the chief state school officer (CSSO), the state higher education executive (SHEEO), and the leadership of the education professions standards entity (if separate from the state education department)
- Support from business and civic leadership organizations and engagement of business leaders at the state and regional levels

- Strong relationships between the state K-12 assessment staff and academic leaders at SHEEO agencies and higher education systems – both community colleges and universities
- Engagement of statewide disciplinary associations at the K-12 and higher education levels
- Support from college and university leaders as well as engagement of provosts, deans of the schools of education and arts and sciences, and faculty involved in reform of general education and entry-level mathematics and English courses
- Regional strategies linking higher education to change at the school level

Sustainable P-20 strategies

Alignment between higher education and K-12 around the CCSS and assessments should not be viewed as a “project” with a start date and an end date. Rather, it must be one step – and, for some states, perhaps the first step – in an ongoing commitment to collaboration between the two sectors. Recognizing the importance of shared P-20 policy development and planning is not new. Many examples exist of states that have experimented with P-20 councils or other collaborative structures. Those that have been successful have had strong buy-in and commitment from leaders. They often are aided by statutory language that establishes goals and mandates while specifying an explicit policy framework and timeline for K-12 and higher education to collaborate in improving college and career readiness.

The most comprehensive state legislation on issues related to college and career readiness was enacted by Colorado in 2008 and Kentucky in 2009, prior to any of the national developments on the CCSS. The depth of support from state policy leaders for these legislative initiatives contributes significantly to their sustainability. The breadth of commitment from a wide cross section of stakeholders also is important – especially when there is broad recognition that the work being done is high quality and credible, leading toward a clearly defined and compelling goal.

In some instances informal networks, developed over a number of years within the formal structures, now serve as a driving force to sustain momentum. For example, states participating in the American Diploma Project, led by Achieve, Inc., developed networks that give them a distinct advantage in sustaining reform through difficult economic times and political change.

Although several states have had strong P-20 initiatives based primarily in their university systems over the past decade, the extent of engagement of the community college systems varies significantly. In some cases, the community colleges are strong partners, especially if the state has a community college system. In others, the relationships are not well developed. The Complete College America project and other state initiatives to improve completion and reach state goals for degree production are serving as bridges for these inter-sector gaps.

Commitment to building higher education capacity for collaboration

States should pay deliberate attention to developing and sustaining state-level capacity to lead higher education in implementation of the new assessments. The need is not only for expanded staff capacity but also for support for convening and engaging faculty at the state, institutional, and regional levels. In some cases, additional funding may be required, perhaps allocated in a manner designed to support joint use between both K-12 and higher education. Even a small amount of funding can help catalyze collaboration at every level: disciplinary groups, schools and institutions, regions, and the state as a whole.

Links between new assessments and on-going test reforms

States that already have seen high levels of higher education involvement in reforming curricular frameworks and assessments for K-12 face a special challenge in implementing the new assessments. In many cases, states that are more predisposed to successful engagement in alignment work had taken steps to revise state curriculum frameworks and begin redesign of state assessments *even before* they committed to implementing the new CCSS or joined one of the assessment consortia. Now they must address how the new assessments will be implemented and/or dovetailed with their current and developing assessment policies. Key considerations include:

- Sequencing of, and setting implementation schedules for, revisions to K-12 assessments
- Selection or redesign of placement assessments
- Implementation or revision of existing state mandates which require all high school students to take the ACT, or the ACT Plan and Explore assessments.
- Revision of existing state mandates regarding use of admissions test scores (e.g., ACT or SAT) to identify students for mandatory placement in developmental education.

How the ACT and College Board products are aligned with the CCSS and new assessments will be an important issue in several states. These college admissions tests are well known to the public and parents and recognized by governors and legislators. They have a long history of being used by colleges and universities for various purposes. They also are better understood, especially among those not directly involved in education reform, than the assessments being developed by the two consortia – Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC). While both ACT and the College Board have been extensively involved in the development of the CCSS, it is not clear how they intend to change their assessments to make use of or align with the new assessments.

Regional strategies within states

Developing a sense of shared responsibility among school districts, community colleges, and universities for increasing the knowledge and skills of a region's students should be a cornerstone of a state's strategy to implement the new assessments. Kentucky stands out as a state that has developed strong regional connections through leadership networks involving state universities, community colleges, the independent sector, and the K-12 system. The Cal-PASS initiative in California is another excellent example of a regional strategy, but it currently is organized as a "bottom-up" voluntary project of participating institutions and is not statewide in reach.

Regional networks within a statewide P-20 strategy should be a central part of a state's implementation strategy. Attendance patterns in most states tend to be regional: a majority of students enroll in institutions within commuting distance of their homes. Often, the majority of teachers within a region's public schools will have graduated from higher education institutions within the region as well.

Recognizing this regional interdependence and fostering regional engagement among schools and higher education can promote a deeper sense of ownership and the sharing of responsibility to increase student success and raise regional educational attainment levels. Regions may be defined as a matter of state policy, or defined in a more organic way through the initiative of local business, civic, and educational leaders. States can support these regional activities by using state-level data projects to identify the flow of students from K-12 to postsecondary institutions, provide feedback on the success of students as they move through the system, and inform deliberations between K-12 and higher education on issues such as college readiness and the need for professional development of teachers and school leaders.

Professional development for teachers and school leaders

Professional development for existing teachers and school leaders is consistently identified as one of the most important prerequisites for effective implementation of the CCSS and especially the new assessments. Nevertheless, with the possible exception of Kentucky, no state appears to have a clear statewide strategy for addressing these needs by tapping the capacity of the state's higher education institutions. Defining constructive ways for higher education to address the professional development needs related to the new assessments should be a priority.

In many states, there appears to be a distinct bias against engaging schools of education in the work, perhaps based on a perception that schools of education are out of touch with today's education realities and the practical needs of districts. Interestingly, individual faculty members from these schools may be active in providing professional development, but as individual entrepreneurs or in affiliation with non-university providers. Schools of education must commit themselves to overcoming these perceptions and demonstrating their ability to make a valuable and practical contribution to a state's professional development efforts.

At the same time, several states visited by NCHEMS (e.g., Colorado, Kentucky, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire) are strong "local control" states where the definition of professional development needs and selection of providers is a responsibility of local school districts. As emphasized throughout this report, states need *statewide strategies* with policy backing from both the state education department and a lead state higher education agency in order to achieve the most effective implementation. Strategies for improved higher education involvement in professional development might include:

- Developing "learning communities" at a regional level, engaging both K-12 and postsecondary teachers/faculty
- Use of higher education faculty (perhaps through regional collaborative organizations) to assist school districts in assessing the readiness of their teachers and school leaders to implement new curricula and related assessments
- Commissioning faculty to design learning modules for use by school districts in professional development programs.

Conclusion

Only a few states currently have the full capacity to lead meaningful involvement of higher education in the implementation of the new assessments being developed in alignment with the Common Core State Standards. The intent of this briefing paper is to provide a guide to the elements of statewide capacity that must be developed if a state intends to meet fully the goals of the new exams. That is not to say a state must have all these elements in order to succeed in creating a strong alignment. By understanding what is optimum, however, stakeholders can design approaches that work in sub-optimal settings.

With the right leadership and commitment by the right stakeholders, states can overcome the deficiencies they may face. In such cases, however, more diligence is needed to maintain and sustain the work. The payoff can be huge. States that are the most successful in pursuing a strong alignment strategy will position themselves and their citizens for increased post-secondary success that brings innumerable economic and community benefits.