

Higher ed is embracing goals of Common Core
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August 18, 2014 |
By Jacqueline King

Most attention to the Common Core State Standards has focused on the continued political backlash against the standards and the status of implementation in schools. As we look ahead to next spring when students will take assessments that indicate whether they are on track to college and career readiness, we are seeing some attention begin to focus on the role of higher education (see New America's [paper](#) on this topic and a story from the [Hechinger Report](#)). Unfortunately, the takeaway from these sources and others is that higher education has mostly been watching from the sidelines and that it has been difficult in many places for K-12 and higher education to overcome decades of entrenched habits and work productively together.

It would be easy to conclude that greater cooperation (and improved alignment) between K-12 and higher education is "mission impossible," given the differences in structure and culture between the two sectors. But I have been deeply involved in efforts to create greater academic alignment between K-12 and higher education for almost a decade — first at the [American Council on Education](#) and now at the [Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium](#) — and I see more reasons for optimism than pessimism. Here's why.

- **There is a growing list of large-scale K-12/higher education cooperative efforts.** Well before Common Core, there were great examples of K-12 and higher education working together to define common academic expectations for students and create a more seamless pathway between the two sectors. California has long been a leader in this regard, dating to the 1960 Master Plan for Higher Education that resulted in consistent admission standards for the three public segments through the launch in 2006 of the **Early Assessment Program (EAP)**, a joint effort of the California State University (CSU), California Department of Education, and California State Board of Education to assess student readiness for credit-bearing courses during Grade 11 and help students use the senior year to address any academic deficiencies. The results have been dramatic; the proportion of first-year students meeting CSU placement standards in English and math has increased from 44 percent in 2007 to 57 percent in 2013. EAP is the model for college readiness policies established by both the Smarter Balanced and PARCC assessment consortia.
- **Faculty helped write the standards.** Initial involvement from higher education faculty was deep but insufficiently broad, so when I was at the American Council on Education, we organized an effort to bring more faculty into the discussion. As a result, the Conference Board on the Mathematical Sciences, an umbrella group for the many scholarly organizations in math and statistics, endorsed the standards based on the recommendation of a broadly diverse committee that it convened. ~~In English,~~ The Modern Language Association also convened a committee to provide feedback on standards for teaching English. While the association did not ultimately endorse the

standards, the recommendations of that committee resulted in a number of important changes to the standards.

- **Faculty generally agree with the standards.** The **Education Policy Improvement Center** asked 1,800 faculty who teach introductory courses in an array of disciplines to review the standards and decide whether they describe the knowledge and skills students need to succeed in their courses. Across the board, more than 80 percent of faculty agreed that the standards are an accurate reflection of the knowledge and skills needed for success in introductory college courses. Anyone who has worked in higher education knows that it is remarkable when more than 80 percent of faculty agree on anything!
- **Teacher preparation programs are changing to reflect the standards.** Colleges of education — and their **accrediting organization** — recognize that teachers must be prepared to help students meet the higher expectations articulated by the Common Core. In California, the higher education system is aligning its teacher preparation standards and assessments with the Common Core standards. In addition, higher education is providing professional development and ongoing teacher support aligned to the Common Core standards.
- **Higher education leaders are voicing their support.** In early June, **Higher Ed for Higher Standards** debuted. This website spotlights several hundred higher education leaders who have lent their names to a statement of support for college and career ready standards and aligned assessments. CSU Chancellor Tim White co-authored an **article** in the Chronicle of Higher Education with university leaders from Maryland and New York arguing that Common Core presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to dramatically increase the number of students ready to succeed in college and the workplace.
- **Higher education will help set assessment performance standards.** This fall, higher education faculty and administrators will join with K–12 educators to recommend the **performance standards** (or “cut scores”) on the new Smarter Balanced assessments that will indicate whether students are on track to readiness for entry-level, credit-bearing college courses. Further, higher education leaders will vote with their K–12 counterparts on these standards for the high school assessments, providing further validation that the assessments are adequately rigorous to measure college readiness. These steps — along with the involvement of higher education faculty in the development of the assessments — will help ensure that these new assessments accurately measure student preparation for success in entry-level, credit-bearing college courses and career education programs.
- **Parents and students will soon demand change.** Looking back at what we have accomplished, I see many reasons for optimism. I am even more encouraged as I look ahead. K–12 educators have taken a courageous step. They have agreed to reset the bar by which they are judged. No longer will it be enough that students display the basic skills necessary for a high school diploma. Schools will be judged based on the proportion of students who graduate ready for college and the high-performance workplace. When students meet that bar, they — and their parents — will demand that higher education recognize their accomplishment in a meaningful way, both by

guaranteeing them placement into credit-bearing courses and by ensuring that those introductory courses build on what they have learned in high school. There is much work to do to find an appropriate balance between the consistent expectations that schools and students need and the diverse institutional missions and curricula that higher education values. But no longer will any of us be able to claim that working together is “mission impossible.”

Community colleges aim to hike degree, transfer rates

LA Times

August 27, 2014

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California community college officials are launching a new effort to ensure that about 250,000 additional students complete their two-year degrees or transfer by decreasing the amount of time they spend taking remedial courses.

To reach that goal, the state's two-year colleges would have to increase graduations or transfers nearly 15 percentage points. Currently, a little less than half of community college students get a degree or transfer.

The number of students who finish technical education programs would have to rise 16 percentage points to nearly 70%.

We simply have to do a better job. We have to get those numbers up.- Brice Harris, chancellor of California Community Colleges

The task "is, frankly, Herculean," California Community Colleges Chancellor Brice Harris said at a news conference Wednesday. But "we simply have to do a better job. We have to get those numbers up."

With nearly 2.1 million students, the 112-campus California community college system is the largest in the country.

Officials are not counting on a large increase in state funding to accomplish their goals, Harris said. Instead, more community colleges will begin giving priority registration to students who participate in orientation and educational planning. The system will offer more academic counseling and provide more targeted remedial courses to students to ensure that they only take classes they need to advance.

North Carolina's two-year schools began offering different assessment tests in 2012 that would more accurately determine which remedial courses students are required to take.

Nearly 75% of California community college students need to take basic math and English courses before they can take classes for credit, according to state statistics.

Students and education officials say it can be difficult to get seats in those classes, which contributes to students failing to finish their educations.

There will be no official sanctions if completion goals aren't met, Harris said. But, if community colleges don't begin producing more graduates who can enter the workforce, "California will begin to lose its competitive edge," Harris said.

Community colleges have ambitious goal to boost state's workforce: Guest commentary

By Brice W. Harris

Daily Breeze, POSTED: 08/26/14, 5:11 PM

This is the time of year when California's 112 community colleges welcome new students to their campuses and begin to prepare them to meet their goals of transferring to a four-year institution or completing a certificate or associate degree that will help them enter the workforce.

These students, if successful, will go on to join a highly skilled workforce that has powered California's economy and attracted an amazingly diverse group of industries that have settled in the state. Firms in California range from technology, entertainment and aerospace to agriculture, health care and financial services. California is home to more than 50 U.S. Fortune 500 companies.

The governor's Office of Business and Economic Development reports that California is the No. 1 state for venture capital and foreign direct investment and generated more than 23,000 patents in 2009, which was substantially more than any other state. California has some of the fastest growing companies in the country and launches a substantial number of initial public offerings. Our lead in these areas can be attributed in large measure to a well-educated workforce that has been trained at outstanding educational institutions in the state.

But that lead is in danger. As has been well documented by economic forecasters, California's systems of public higher education are not producing enough college-educated workers to keep our economy steaming forward. That is alarming.

If California entrepreneurship and innovation are to thrive over the long haul, we need to educate more of our citizens for jobs that are available now and to develop a workforce that will attract more business investment.

With this challenge in mind, the California Community Colleges Board of Governors has set an ambitious goal to help California meet its workforce needs: Community colleges will seek to increase the number of students earning certificates, degrees, or transferring to four-year institutions by 227,250 by the time the next 10 incoming freshman classes, including those arriving at our campuses this month, are finished.

Achieving the completion outcomes will require increasing the system's completion rate for degree and transfer-seekers from 48.1 percent to 62.8 percent and completion rate for students in career technical education programs from 53.9 percent to 70.3 percent by the time the class of 2023-24 completes its studies.

The new goals also aim to increase the number of students who successfully complete remedial instruction, which unfortunately 75 percent of our students need when they arrive at our campuses. And we've set targets to increase the number of students who prepare educational plans at the beginning of their academic careers as well as the number of students who earn degrees under the Associate Degree for Transfer program, which has improved transfer with California State University.

How will we do this? A comprehensive series of policy reforms enacted by the Board of Governors has focused the college system on improving student success as it restores access that was lost after the draconian recessionary budget cuts we endured.

The reforms, part of our "Student Success Initiative," include giving priority registration status to students who participate in orientation, assessment and education planning; redesigning our student support services to help them stay on track academically; making it easier for students to transfer to CSUs; and collaborating with K-12 institutions to ensure that students come here ready to take college-level math and English courses.

A society must invest in the education of its citizenry to be prosperous. History is filled with examples of failed societies that chose not to make the crucial investments necessary to educate their citizens. This state has a proud legacy of empowering its residents through higher education. The results of that legacy are clear, and California's community colleges are committed to restoring it.