

# Not Ready for College

States must have a systemic, comprehensive agenda for college preparation

By David Spence

**T**HIS SUMMER, the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education and the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) published “Beyond the Rhetoric: Improving College Readiness Through Coherent State Policy,” a report describing how states can improve their efforts to improve high school students’ college readiness. It outlines the magnitude and nature of the college-readiness problem and suggests a more systemic and comprehensive set of steps that states can use to address this challenge more urgently and effectively.

## The extent of the readiness problem

“Beyond the Rhetoric” asserts that high school students’ lack of academic readiness for college is much more severe than many policymakers understand or than has been widely reported. Identifying the size of the readiness problem is difficult because in most states postsecondary education does not share common college-readiness standards that are applied through common assessments and qualifying scores for all entering freshmen.

And even in the few states where postsecondary education uses the same readiness assessment for entering freshmen, the performance levels expected of students are too low to predict their chances for success in college accurately. So, based on these varying standards, college-placement tests and low scores, many state policymakers and education leaders estimate that only about 25 to 35 percent of students entering public four-year institutions, and about 60 percent of those

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in community colleges, need remedial education.

The problem is far greater than that.

Research and several states’ experiences now strongly suggest that these rates would be much higher if states had higher, more uniform college-readiness standards to help them predict high school students’ chances for success in college—like

the new Common Core State Standards adopted by many states across the nation in the past year. Two examples in which such readiness standards are applied to large numbers of students clearly show the magnitude of the readiness problem:

- ACT, Inc. has established college-readiness benchmarks in reading and mathematics that correlate with students’

success in first-year college courses. While the benchmark scores of 21 in reading and 23 in math are modest, these scores (if applied by all colleges in determining students’ college readiness) would result in two-thirds of all ACT test takers who enroll in college requiring remedial education in English, math or both.

- A similar conclusion has emerged in the massive California State University system, which for many years has applied substantial placement or readiness standards in reading, writing and math linked to first-year college coursework. All first-time students at all 23 Cal State campuses must meet these standards, principally through performance on common statewide placement exams given in high school. Despite a systemwide admissions policy that requires students to have taken a college-preparatory curriculum and earn a B average or higher, about 68 percent of the 50,000 entering freshmen at Cal State campuses require remediation in language arts or math, or both. Most states likely would have similar remediation rates if they employed similar college-readiness standards and placement tests across all of their public community colleges and less selective public universities.

So, why are the rates of students who need remedial education in college underestimated by 20 or 30 percentage points, or more? One reason is the continuing misunderstanding between college *admissions* and college *readiness* (or placement). Students are admitted to college using varying kinds and levels of criteria, including their grades, courses taken, and SAT and ACT scores. Admissions criteria are high at selective public universities, lower at most regional universities, and virtually non-existent at community colleges. More than 80 percent of freshmen who enter public institutions attend these less-selective or open-door universities and community colleges.

Once admitted, students’ reading, writing and math-related skills are assessed. The high admissions criteria in selective universities normally means that students who qualify for those institutions already have the skills they need to succeed in first-year courses. However, lower, or fewer, admissions criteria—or the absence of them—at most public regional universities and community colleges requires that admitted students are tested on their reading, writing and math-related readiness skills, because college admissions in these institutions does not guarantee college readiness.

There also are technical reasons behind the low estimates



of remediation rates: Individual institutions or systems within states use different tests to determine students' readiness levels, and set their own qualifying scores. Also, required qualifying scores are often too low to predict students' success in first-year college courses. Importantly, it is common that most college-readiness tests do not address the kinds and levels of reading skills needed for college. Many current placement tests do not require students to comprehend appropriately complex texts and write about them accurately. In other

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words, current testing for college readiness often downplays the most important skill students need in order to succeed in college courses.

Moreover, through our college-readiness work with states at SREB, we have found two other conditions that suppress statewide efforts to determine the scope of the readiness problem: The first is the practice in most states of not relating readiness-test performance to actual student-performance outcomes in the first year of college. Setting accurate readiness test scores should be an empirical and validated process.

Second, some officials and educators are concerned that setting more accurate, predictive and higher scores will force remediation rates to spike. Indeed, remediation rates may rise in the near term. But phasing in more accurate measures of students' readiness levels is a far better option than allowing the college-readiness problem to continue unrecognized—and largely unabated.

Rather than continue to allow too many students who begin postsecondary education to enroll and never finish any type of degree or certificate, states and their college systems are better off setting valid rates now and using the senior year of high school to address students' lack of college readiness. Moreover, where relevant, states need to put on hold plans to remove remedial education from senior colleges. Remediation will remain with us for awhile, as states begin to acknowledge the real size and nature of the college-readiness challenge and finally begin to address it.

### **The nature of the readiness problem**

The most telling characteristic of the readiness problem traces to the high percentages of students who pass a college-preparatory curriculum in high school but do not have the key foundational learning skills in reading, writing and math they will need for college. Most students entering four-year, less-selective public institutions have completed a college-prep curriculum—but appropriate college-readiness standards would show that more than 60 percent of those students would need remedial education. Clearly, at this point, taking the right courses is not sufficient.

A college-prep curriculum does not ensure the development of the critical thinking and learning skills associated with reading, writing and math that are the fundamental, cross-cutting skills needed for college success in all subjects. And they are skills that college placement or readiness tests expose as insufficiently mastered by most

entering students.

In their defense, high schools are hampered by a lack of clear signals from all postsecondary education about the skills students need for college. Postsecondary education has been clear that students need the right courses in high school, but has not clearly outlined the *kinds* and *levels* of reading, writing and math-related skills that students need. High schools cannot help students develop those skills if postsecondary education has not identified them.

### **Building a systemic, comprehensive agenda for college readiness**

Strengthening students' college-readiness skills requires a *systemic* embedding of high reading, writing and math standards in high school—as part of a comprehensive statewide policy agenda that can help states address the problem on a number of fronts.

The statewide agenda should be based on building consensus between K–12 and postsecondary education on the higher, deeper and more specific reading, writing and math standards that high school students should be expected to meet. The new Common Core State Standards adopted recently by many states for K–12 schools can provide the basis for this step. State assessments in high school can help to further define and apply these standards statewide.

However, for the standards to lead to higher student achievement, states must take additional action to make the college-readiness standards central to high school coursework, teachers' development and evaluation, and school accountability. Moreover, all postsecondary institutions need to embrace and apply the readiness standards uniformly. In short, the higher readiness standards will help to improve college readiness only if they are applied systemically, as part of a comprehensive state policy agenda, which should include the following steps:

- *Common readiness standards.* States need to have all schools and colleges statewide adopt common college-readiness standards in reading, writing and math, that should be highlighted components of the official state academic standards for K–12 schools and that are used by all colleges in determining students' readiness for credit-bearing courses. The content of the standards needs to be expressed in performance terms through the development of assessments and curricular frameworks, model assignments and common grading practices. These performance standards must predict *true* college readiness, even though the standards will require students to show higher levels of skill than for minimum diploma requirements—and higher than existing college-readiness or college-placement standards now in use by postsecondary education. States need to validate these standards by correlating them to actual performance in introductory college courses. The new Common Core State Standards provide a sound basis for such readiness standards.

- *High school tests tied to the readiness standards.* States need to assess students' progress in meeting the readiness standards no later than the junior year of high school, which in many states could require new or amended state assessments. The assessments under development by the assessment consortia associated with the Common Core

State Standards will be a promising source of these college-readiness focused tests. In the meantime, a number of states are moving to end-of-course assessments in high schools that can be tailored to measure student performance on the readiness standards, especially in English 3 and algebra 2.

These readiness assessments are critical because their results can be used to modify high school instruction and/or curriculum to focus on the standards and to direct students into courses that can help them sharpen key skills—so that more high school students will be ready for college.

- *Common application of the standards by postsecondary education.* For the readiness standards to have the greatest impact statewide, all community colleges and regional universities should agree on and use a uniform assessment and qualifying scores based on the common readiness standards. Systemic reform will happen only if high schools and colleges apply the same standards.

- *Emphasis of the readiness standards in high school courses.* While the adoption of the statewide readiness standards and development of associated assessments are fundamental steps, building the standards deeply into high school coursework and teaching will determine ultimately whether more students meet the standards. Accordingly, the school curriculum should be modified, starting in the middle grades or earlier, to focus explicitly in each course on the development of skills that will enable students to learn at the college level. Recognizing that it will take some time to implement these standards fully in all grades and courses, SREB calls for the development of supplemental 12th grade courses to help students who are not on track to be college-ready, based on 11th grade assessments. These courses should focus explicitly on the reading, writing and math readiness skills that students need.

- *Teaching of the readiness standards.* The most critical part of the readiness agenda is K–12 teachers’ effectiveness

in helping more students develop the skills they need. Teachers can help students reach these higher levels of skill, if they are supported by clear, unified, common statewide readiness standards; the application of these standards in school assessments and school-accountability systems; and,

curriculum frameworks and pre-service and in-service preparation focused on the standards.

Teacher development, both pre-service for prospective teachers and in-service for practicing teachers, should focus more precisely on the clearer standards and helping students meet them, along with course content, assignments and grading practices.

- *State accountability systems also should emphasize college readiness.* Despite all the emphasis on accountability in K–12

and postsecondary education, most states do not hold either sector accountable for improving students’ college readiness. States should require high schools and local K–12 systems to increase the percentages of high school graduates who are college-ready annually. In addition, to push postsecondary education and K–12 schools to improve students’ readiness jointly, states should hold postsecondary education accountable for increasing the proportion of remedial students who transition into college courses, and the proportion of these students who complete college degrees and certificates. Postsecondary education must be held accountable for its roles in improving college readiness and degree-completion rates—while maintaining access.

In summary, states need to address the college-readiness challenge with a clearer understanding that the problem is much greater than is commonly recognized. What’s more, strengthening students’ college readiness not only involves better standards and assessments, but also curriculum, teacher development and accountability.

States need to address the college-readiness challenge with urgency—and systemically and comprehensively. States simply cannot afford to wait until new high school assessments can be developed. Best practices in states such as California, Texas, Florida, Kentucky and others provide enough guidance for states to move quickly to improve students’ college readiness—and to use higher standards in school curriculum and teaching. Now is not a moment too soon. ♦

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