

Chapter Three

Building State College Readiness Initiatives

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During this decade, the college readiness theme has grown but not prospered. Although many states have developed P–16 councils, most states have not moved beyond the initial stages of dialogue to build effective statewide college readiness initiatives. This chapter outlines the key elements and actions that states need to consider in implementing a systemic readiness initiative, and concludes by examining some of the underlying reasons for the lack of progress nationwide. The key insights and suggestions in this chapter derive from the experiences of the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) in working with states on readiness initiatives, and from my experiences at California State University in seeking to improve college readiness of students.

I. STATEWIDE CONSENSUS ON KEY CONCEPTS

In order for a statewide college readiness initiative to gain traction and be sustainable over time, state leaders from government, K–12 schools, and postsecondary education need to develop consensus on some fundamental understandings and principles. The following five suggestions identify the key areas where consensus is needed.

1. Understand the Substance of Readiness

Students need to achieve a wide range of accomplishments and skills to be truly ready for postsecondary education, in course-taking, grades, study and scheduling skills, financial stability, motivation, and other areas. Because some of these attributes are intangible, it is difficult to measure their significance precisely. We know, however, that several are necessary, if not sufficient.

There is wide consensus—from research and practice—that students need to take appropriate courses to be ready for college. This core curriculum includes courses in reading, writing, and mathematics, since these are the cross-cutting, foundational skills needed for success in many first-year college courses. It also includes other academic courses, such as in science and social science. Research and practice also indicate, however, that taking these courses, and even earning good grades, does not ensure the development of the key learning skills needed for college success. A high percentage of students who have passed core academic coursework need remedial education in reading, writing, and math upon entering college.

As a result, student demonstration of high-level reading, writing, and math skills is critical to ensure college readiness. For higher-level study in any subject, it is essential that students be able to read a variety of texts with comprehension and to explain or elaborate their ideas in writing. Additionally, some success in mathematics—preferably through algebra II, but minimally through algebra, functions, and data analysis—assures that a student possesses the ability to work abstractly and with variables.

There is confusion nationally on this point concerning course-taking versus skills development. This confusion is caused by a lack of clarity and precision in how one views the courses or programs of study that students pursue in high school, on one hand, and the foundational or cross-cutting learning skills that students develop as part of these courses. However, this is not an either/or issue. Students need to take the right courses and develop the learning skills.

There appears to be growing agreement that all students need to tackle a core curriculum—four courses in English, four in mathematics at least through algebra II, four in science, and four in social science. Within this curriculum, schools can challenge and help students achieve a core of the knowledge and skills associated with this coursework, as documented by their grades and possibly by course-related common testing. These expectations should apply to all students, and can provide a background of knowledge and skills needed for success in college and careers.

However, in examining the specific reading, writing, and mathematics skills students need to continue learning after high school, it is generally agreed that whatever readiness standards do exist, they are not sufficiently rigorous to predict success. Either the standards do not exist statewide or they are set too low to predict success in first-year collegiate coursework to a significant extent. As a result, statewide college readiness initiatives require higher readiness standards in fundamental skill areas of reading, writing, and mathematics.

2. Identify the Scope of Readiness Standards: Readiness for What?

States need to move beyond the hopeful rhetoric about “all students ready for all options.” This generic language is not helpful, and it masks the challenges ahead. States need to identify clearly the levels, programs, and forms of postsecondary education to which readiness standards apply.

Readiness for Which Postsecondary Options?

Postsecondary education opportunities are wide ranging. They include career-technical and academic programs, and they range from military training to single courses, certificate programs, and associate and baccalaureate degree programs. Also included are on-the-job training and apprenticeship programs that merge career preparation and entry. For several years, popular rhetoric has held that all high school graduates need to be ready for all postsecondary opportunities, and that reading, writing, and math standards

are identical for all such options. This rhetoric has not been examined thoroughly and empirically. Moreover, as organizations and states have begun questioning this assumption, there is movement toward a more nuanced view.

Statewide college readiness initiatives need to focus on readiness to prepare for a career or job, rather than readiness to enter a career directly after high school graduation. The learning skills needed for success in collegiate academic programs and post-secondary career-technical programs for economically sustainable jobs have converged. Empirical evidence supports the application of similar readiness standards for postsecondary associate and bachelor's degree programs, both academic and career-oriented.¹ There is less research that establishes the kinds and levels of readiness needed for postsecondary technical programs at the certificate versus the diploma levels. Further study may suggest that one set of readiness standards for all postsecondary education is justified or that different forms of readiness, or ways to exhibit readiness, are needed.

Our experience at the Southern Regional Education Board indicates that effective statewide readiness initiatives should set readiness standards significantly higher than is now common. As states validate and then establish in policy these higher standards for degree programs, it is likely that differences in readiness for degree and non-degree programs may emerge. As a result, statewide readiness initiatives should focus initially on postsecondary degree programs, including career-technical associate degrees. A first priority should be to set strong, valid standards for associate's and bachelor's degree programs; at the same time, states should research fully the readiness standards suitable for non-degree programs.²

Readiness for Which Institutions of Postsecondary Education?

For greater impact, the readiness standards need to be applied to all postsecondary institutions that have a significant proportion of students who require remedial coursework in reading, writing, math, or all three areas. Practically, this means that all open-access, less selective, and moderately selective community colleges, colleges, and universities would be included (certainly encompassing all community colleges and regional universities). Students at selective universities with substantial admissions requirements would most likely meet the readiness standards, even though the standards, while related, would not necessarily align with the broader admissions criteria of these selective institutions (such as coursework, grades, and test scores). In light of these considerations, most statewide readiness initiatives need to apply to the community college and regional university sectors, and be led primarily by these sectors as well.

¹ This evidence is based in research concerning readiness or placement testing that occurs in colleges and universities.

² These studies were recommended by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) panel on 12th grade readiness.

Readiness for Which Areas of Postsecondary Study?

States have found it important to establish that their common core readiness standards apply to certain thresholds of study. The most common, and probably best, practice asserts that the readiness standards should be pegged to the level of reading, writing, and math skills needed to succeed in introductory coursework in the social science fields. Readiness to begin study in STEM fields (that is, science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) would require higher or different levels of readiness, particularly in mathematics. As they do now, postsecondary educational institutions would apply a different set of standards and assessments in the reading, writing, and math skill areas to determine readiness for these fields of study.

3. Recognize the Difference Between Readiness and Admissions Standards

Statewide college readiness initiatives seek to increase the percentage of high school students who are ready to begin postsecondary education. States, and the nation, decided long ago that access to college is a critical priority, meaning that states would provide students with opportunities to be admitted to at least some segments of postsecondary education, even if they needed remedial education.

This opportunity to attend college needs to be protected even as states seek to increase the readiness of students. Current admissions policies should continue to support access, and colleges should continue to offer remedial education, albeit more effectively and targeted toward higher expectations of performance. Concurrently, the less-selective and open-door institutions of postsecondary education need to join with the public schools to develop statewide readiness initiatives that reduce the need for remedial education. States should guard against the perception that a statewide college readiness initiative may be used to limit access or entry.

4. Ensure that College Readiness Standards Strongly Predict Skills Needed to Succeed in College

Few states, as a matter of public policy, recognize the nature and magnitude of the readiness challenge. This is because states have not set readiness standards that powerfully predict success in postsecondary education; nor do states apply them across all postsecondary education—from community colleges to universities. In other words, states either have no statewide readiness standards, or if they have them, they are set too low.

Self-reports by institutions of postsecondary education typically estimate remedial rates of 50% to 60% for community colleges and 20% to 30% for universities. However, in the few instances in which a state sets rigorous statewide or systemwide readiness standards, the rates for regional universities rise to 70%, and even higher for community college degree programs.

In 2005, ACT began to report the percentages of ACT-takers who achieved modest college readiness benchmarks that indicated a 50% chance of earning a B and a 75% chance of earning a C in first-year college courses in English and math. The results show that 70% of students need remedial help in English, math, or both (ACT 2009).

States need to link their college readiness standards to performance levels that virtually ensure success in at least the first year of college coursework. Best practice holds that these standards should be validated empirically by comparing student performance on the readiness standards to actual performance in introductory post-secondary courses. Practically, this will require states to establish significantly higher readiness standards than those in place currently (if any exist at the state level). Moreover, it is highly likely that the application of these standards will increase rates of remediation in the short term. It is important that states recognize this situation, and maintain their focus on setting readiness standards at the high levels needed for success in postsecondary education. The worst case would be for a state to maintain mediocre readiness standards in order to minimize any potential increase in remediation.

5. Recognize the Gap Between High School Graduation and Postsecondary Readiness

States with high school graduation tests will discover that rigorous standards reflecting postsecondary readiness will require substantially higher scores on exams than the minimum scores required for graduation. The gap between current high school graduation standards and those needed for postsecondary readiness will occur in all states. States need to recognize this gap, and commit to increasing the percentage of graduates who meet the readiness standards.

II. THE STEPS OF A STATEWIDE COLLEGE READINESS INITIATIVE

Several organizations and states have proposed college and career readiness agendas that feature important elements for improving college readiness. The following steps or components, taken together and implemented effectively, comprise a *comprehensive* and *systemic* statewide college readiness initiative.

1. Statewide College/Career Readiness Standards

The success of a statewide college readiness initiative depends on having one set of performance standards for reading, writing, and mathematics that are approved and prioritized by all public schools and postsecondary institutions. Having one set of standards is vital to sending clear signals to all high school students and teachers about what it means to be college/career ready. The readiness standards should be defined in detail in both content and performance terms. Teachers deserve one set of targeted standards and will thrive on having a focused set of fewer and deeper standards.

2. Common and Consistent Application of Readiness Standards

Both K–12 and postsecondary education need to recognize the same core readiness standards as driving college readiness preparation in all public schools and all readiness/course placement procedures in postsecondary education.

3. Readiness Assessments in High School (11th Grade)

It is important to assess students' progress in meeting the readiness standards no later than their junior year in high school. These assessments will serve to identify concretely the levels of performance needed across the readiness standards, and they will give high school students (and their teachers) specific feedback on progress in meeting the readiness standards. In addition, they will identify students who need targeted help during the senior year to meet the standards.

4. School Curriculum

Public school curricula should be modified as necessary to target the specific statewide readiness standards, mapping back at least to grade eight. Supplemental curricula and programs designed to teach the skills needed to succeed in first-year college courses should be developed and taught in 12th grade to help students who, based on 11th grade assessments, may graduate without being college-ready.

5. Teacher Development

Ensuring that all teachers fully understand the readiness standards, their importance, and how to teach them effectively is a central component of a statewide college readiness initiative. Teacher development targeted specifically to the readiness standards is crucial, and involves both pre-service and in-service preparation. Pre-service teacher preparation programs need to be reviewed and revised as needed to include an emphasis on the core readiness standards. In addition, adjustments need to be made in state teacher licensure and certification regulations, so as to reinforce the standards.

6. School Accountability

School and student performance on the college readiness assessments should be part of the state school accountability program. This would send a clear message that it is important that all schools make college readiness a priority and that increasing percentages of students meet the standards.

7. Postsecondary Education Accountability for the Application of the Standards

In order for the college readiness initiative to be systemic and effective, postsecondary education as a whole must be involved in many of the key steps. To give the readiness standards the high priority needed across public schools, all postsecondary institutions

that engage in post-admission placement or readiness testing need to base such assessments on the readiness standards and performance levels adopted statewide. In addition, states need to hold postsecondary education more accountable for related outcomes—namely, increasing the percentage of entering students who succeed in first-year courses, and increasing the percentage who successfully complete remedial work based on the shared state readiness standards.

III. PRINCIPLES FOR BUILDING THE READINESS INITIATIVE

The effectiveness of a statewide college readiness initiative depends both on its being comprehensive (the full range of components are implemented) and systemic (each step is connected to the others).

Many statewide college readiness initiatives are too narrow: they fail to address the comprehensive range of steps beyond the creation or alignment of readiness standards and assessments. While developing precise and clear readiness standards is the cornerstone of the process, it is through assessment and professional development that the standards are implemented and readiness becomes a reality. The best readiness standards will go for naught if teachers are not clear about what they are to teach, how best to teach it, and how to identify whether students have adequately learned it.

Across states, the order of implementation for the components of a readiness initiative will vary depending on the state's circumstances and cycles. Nonetheless, all components are ultimately required. Failure to incorporate all of them is a principal reason that many states' efforts are falling short. For instance, many states have increased the number of required courses for high school graduation, but have not identified the core readiness standards in reading, writing, and mathematics as separate but related requirements. Other states have established such skill standards as part of college readiness standards, but have failed to get all public colleges and universities to use those standards in placing students in college-level courses. Other states have increased teacher training, but have not linked the training to specific readiness standards in those fields, limiting the impact of the training on college and career readiness.

In addition to being comprehensive, college readiness initiatives need to be implemented through a systemic, coordinated approach. Adherence to the following principles can assist in developing such an approach:

1. Create a common vision of success;
2. Link all steps to the readiness standards;
3. Make decisions based on what will help classroom teachers most; and
4. Develop joint ownership by K–12 and postsecondary education.

1. Create a Common Vision of Success

State policy leaders, K–12 education, and postsecondary education need to agree specifically on what defines a successful initiative in terms of both K–12 and postsecondary educational goals. These goals need to mesh and be mutually supportive, and it is helpful for the outcomes to begin with postsecondary education and trace back to K–12. Performance objectives should be grounded in empirically based, realistic descriptions of the readiness standards, the current status of student readiness, and the goals for increasing readiness statewide. These goals should be ambitious but reachable.

Success factors for postsecondary education include completion rates for first-year students in first-year coursework and overall degree-completion rates. Another important factor is the extent to which remedial education programs succeed in helping students meet the standards. The goals need to specify which postsecondary education institutions, sectors, levels, and kinds of programs will be targeted. Outcomes need to be defined in terms of measures used, types of goal (improvement or absolute), and timeframe. Goals for K–12 education need to center on improving the percentages of students meeting the readiness standards.

In short, concrete goals and measures need to be set for improving readiness, and the subsequent outcomes of doing so need to be identified. To ensure transparency for the general public, state accountability programs and public reporting activities for schools and colleges should feature these goals and measures.

2. Link All Steps to the Readiness Standards

To ensure systemic alignment among the components, it is crucial to maintain a clear focus on developing and implementing a specific set of core readiness standards. All other steps should flow from and lead back to this focus. Some of the steps can be started as the standards are being identified; however, no step can be implemented fully without the core readiness standards in place.

K–12 and postsecondary education ultimately need to agree on one set of readiness standards in reading, writing, and mathematics, which should be defined in detail in both content and performance terms. Both K–12 and postsecondary education need to adopt these standards, prioritize them, and apply them rigorously. Working from one set of clearly defined readiness standards contributes greatly to the extent to which classroom teachers will come to understand the standards and commit to the teaching of associated curricula. The teachers deserve one set of target standards rather than competing standards or “crosswalk” documents that seek to connect similar but slightly different standards.

Not achieving agreement on common readiness standards poses the greatest risk to successful implementation of the readiness initiative. Statewide college readiness initiatives have progressed beyond the early “standards phase” in only a few states, and this is largely owing to a lack of development in substantive detail of such standards.

While most agree that developing consensus on readiness standards is crucial, less certainty and unanimity exist concerning the nature of the standards and how to build consensus, including between K–12 and postsecondary education.

The path taken by most states has emphasized the alignment process, which suffers from several deficiencies. First, the expected nature of the readiness standards is not clear or established from the beginning. Second, alignment frequently begins and ends with a comparison of proposed readiness standards for K–12 schools with standards that have been set externally, such as those of Achieve’s American Diploma Project (ADP) or the standards that provide the basis for the ACT or SAT. This kind of “benchmark comparative alignment” provides useful information to assure a certain level of quality or appropriate substance in the proposed standards. While this “quality benchmarking” is important, the alignment process typically does not venture into other needed phases of standards-setting. Alignment seldom goes beyond comparisons of the general content of standards. While describing the content of a standard is necessary, it is not sufficient for implementation purposes. For a standard to be conveyed to and understood by teachers, it must have a clear performance dimension—it must establish how well the content must be performed. Few states have extended their alignment efforts into these domains, which practically and necessarily require more complex comparisons of standards-related assessments, curriculum frameworks, and even student assignments.

In addition, current alignment efforts seldom compare the readiness standards of K–12 and postsecondary education within the state. Of course, this kind of comparison is not possible in most states, because their systems of postsecondary education do not have a single set of readiness standards to advance.

3. Make Decisions Based on What Will Help Classroom Teachers

The implementation of a readiness initiative can be strengthened if decisions in each step are made according to the following principle: Which option will best create the conditions for classroom teachers statewide to help students be ready for college? This principle recognizes that the K–12 classroom is the primary focus of action. It is where education needs to change to increase student readiness.

This principle arguably provides the most critical element in pursuing a systemic, connected approach to building a statewide college readiness initiative. Linking all action steps and decisions to one criterion—what will help the classroom teacher most—provides a common, clear thread connecting standards to testing to curriculum to teacher development to school and college accountability. This principle can guide decisions about the kinds of standards and who sets them, the form and nature of testing involved, the criteria of school accountability, and the nature of the school curriculum and teacher development. In each of these areas, there are often competing options to be sorted through, but there is usually a best alternative when this principle is applied.

4. Develop Joint Ownership by K–12 and Postsecondary Education

Joint ownership and action by K–12 and postsecondary education are crucial to connecting and strengthening each step in a readiness initiative. In light of the critical importance of creating a common set of readiness standards, it seems obvious that their development should be fully shared at the deepest levels. To the contrary, the typical situation finds K–12 and postsecondary education advancing their own individual sets of standards and then relying on a superimposed process to align them. In addition, the involvement of postsecondary education in the development of school testing and curriculum is rare. Postsecondary education often has a role in teacher development, including in-service and teacher preparation programs; however, in few cases have K–12 and postsecondary education jointly developed curricula specifically around the readiness standards.

The importance of joint action stems from its capacity to build deep and common understanding and commitment to the core standards. Only through truly joint work, beginning with the creation of the standards, can K–12 and postsecondary education develop ownership of the content and of the more subtle performance expectations. This joint ownership will also strengthen the effectiveness of each component of the initiative. For example, the involvement of postsecondary education in the construction of readiness assessments can ensure a consensus on performance levels and qualifying scores. As a result of their participation, postsecondary education can adopt post-admission placement testing and remedial education programs based on the exact standards and performance expectations used by K–12 in its readiness tests. In addition, postsecondary education can use its knowledge of the standards to connect its in-service and pre-service programs to the standards. Likewise, the direct involvement of postsecondary education can also be beneficial in developing senior-year courses focused on helping students meet the readiness standards.

A systemic approach also suggests that both the 12th grade courses and postsecondary remedial courses focus on the same readiness standards and performance expectations. It further holds that the 12th grade courses and the summer or freshman-year remedial courses should be similar in content and delivery. Certainly, these courses should be consistent in their focus on the readiness outcomes.

IV. IMPLEMENTATION AND BEST PRACTICES

Building on the principles of the previous section, this section examines in greater detail the seven steps of a comprehensive and systemic statewide college readiness initiative, with explanations concerning how a principle might apply, and descriptions of best or common practices.

1. Statewide College/Career Readiness Standards

The development of an effective set of readiness standards is fundamental to driving each subsequent step in the agenda. To ensure the most effective standards, we suggest the following:

a. Focus on learning skills, while also making clear that readiness depends on taking the core courses that are necessary for college success.

Being ready for college requires that the right courses be taken in high school. Taking the right college preparatory curriculum, however, does not ensure that necessary learning skills (reading, writing, and mathematical reasoning) have been developed. States, or their systems of higher education, should require appropriate coursework in high school for college readiness, but they should also focus on ensuring that key learning skills are developed.

Most states and readiness experts have focused on reading, writing, and math skills because more is known about the relationship of these core skills to first-year success in college. These are also the skills that enable students to learn further and to build knowledge. They are the cross-cutting, foundational skills needed for learning in any discipline. As a result, they are most appropriate to statewide efforts to establish a threshold level of skills for college readiness. While adding knowledge-based standards from the various science and social science subject areas might make the readiness criteria stronger and more predictive, it is the reading, writing, and math skills that are essential, and probably most predictive of readiness. Moreover, a concentration on fewer standards in depth is probably more powerful in statewide initiatives of this scope.

b. Define the standards in both content and performance terms.

It is critical to provide a detailed description of the content of the readiness standards. These descriptions of the specific skills and knowledge needed provide the foundation from which the standards are interpreted and manifested by the schools and their teachers.

However, these general content descriptions must also be converted into performance terms, to identify how well something can be done or known. Deriving and building common statewide understandings of student performance is challenging, intensive work. These performance expectations are defined through the development of test items, rubrics, curricular materials, assignments, and associated grading protocols. The performance expectations are further interpreted through new teacher preparation and professional development. Only in these ways can classroom teachers come to know exactly what levels and kinds of performance characterize a standard.

Defining explicitly how well and at what level a student needs to be reading, writing, or doing math to be ready for college can be accomplished by having

postsecondary and public school teachers (with the technical assistance of experts) develop a shared understanding of expected performance levels. This can be done by postsecondary and K–12 teachers jointly evaluating student work and negotiating a shared view of acceptable levels of performance. This will be painstaking, detailed work, but it can yield invaluable results—a clear sense of exactly how well students must perform. Indeed, this interactive process will help to powerfully convey the readiness standards to classroom teachers through professional development, and to prospective teachers in preparation programs. State readiness initiatives need to be capped by such a process, or all of the standards-setting and testing will have limited value.

c. The exact readiness standards created by K–12 and postsecondary education should be embedded in the state curriculum and adopted by the state K–12 and postsecondary education boards.

This issue concerns the relationships of the college readiness and school standards. Teachers should not be forced to sort through overlaying or correlating (if not competing) sets of academic standards. In this era of school accountability, teachers focus on state-adopted standards and tests more than ever. Some states will need to upgrade, revise, supplement, or substitute current school standards to ensure that the exact readiness standards are embedded and that they reflect the performance expectations.

2. Common and Consistent Application of Readiness Standards

With these fully shared and commonly understood standards in place, both K–12 and postsecondary education need to commit to their application throughout each of their respective sectors and in each successive step of the initiative. One example of the need for consistent application of readiness standards concerns the current situation in which individual institutions of postsecondary education, especially community colleges, do not use a common set of placement standards or tests to assess readiness, nor are they based on any existing school-based standards.

In concrete terms, consistent application of the common readiness standards means that the specific standards and performance expectations are:

- Adopted by the state board as official state school standards;
- Emphasized and highlighted in school testing programs;
- Used and emphasized in school curriculum frameworks and materials;
- Used by the state to hold schools accountable for increasing the percentages of students who meet the standards;
- Used by K–12 and postsecondary education to develop senior-year curricula focused specifically on the common readiness standards to help students who are not ready;

- Used by both K–12 and postsecondary education to deliver in-service teacher development statewide;
- Used by postsecondary education in all its pre-service teacher preparation programs;
- Used by postsecondary education in their post-admission placement or readiness tests, which means one set of placement tests and qualifying scores across all postsecondary education; and
- Used by postsecondary education as central standards that guide postsecondary education remedial programs.

3. Readiness Assessments in High School (11th Grade)

By assessing student progress in meeting the readiness standards in the 11th grade, a statewide readiness initiative can signal students about their progress while allowing time to strengthen key skills before completing high school. Just as importantly, the tests can help teachers understand more deeply the performance that is expected of students.

As states have developed the assessment component of readiness initiatives, implementation issues have included the following:

a. Selection of Test

Perhaps the most critical issue concerns the kind of test to be used. A few states have used tests such as the ACT or SAT to estimate readiness. They have the advantage of providing normative comparisons with other states and of being commonly used already—many students take them. However, their substantial disadvantage lies in the likelihood that their standards will not be connected directly and strongly to a state’s common readiness standards. This risks sending competing signals to teachers.

In considering the form of readiness testing to use, states should apply two systemic principles discussed above, namely: (1) Which is most closely linked to the single set of readiness standards shared by K–12 and postsecondary education? and (2) Which is most effective in helping teachers understand the standards and employ them effectively?

State-originated tests appear to meet these two criteria most effectively. Teachers give priority to tests that are central to state, school, and student accountability. To the extent that these state tests can be adjusted to include the full range of readiness standards, they will rise to an even higher level of priority for classroom teachers. Also, state tests have the advantage of being more closely linked to state-adopted standards and classroom teaching.

If the state decides to use admissions and norm-referenced tests such as the ACT and SAT, the state will need assurance that these tests contribute to the following criteria:

- The standards on which these tests are based become the recognized statewide college readiness standards;
- The ACT or SAT standards—not correlates or additions—become the officially recognized statewide public school standards;
- These tests become the state tests for assessing both college readiness and high school achievement of the school standards (and are factors in the state school accountability process); and
- The ACT or SAT standards are made transparent enough so that they can be conveyed to classroom teachers in performance terms.

The more straightforward choice, however, is for states to identify one set of readiness standards agreed to by schools and colleges statewide, integrate these identical standards into state-adopted school standards, and then revise state tests to measure performance on these exact standards.

b. End-of-Course Exams

Another assessment issue that needs resolution concerns the basis for the test—course-based or comprehensive (across a series of courses). End-of-course tests (in English III and algebra II) are emerging as best practice, owing to their capacity to connect the specific readiness standards explicitly and strongly to classroom teachers and curricula. These tests can be crafted to target the specific state readiness standards and can yield information useful for identifying student needs and improving instruction. States can highlight subsets of items on these tests to target the readiness standards and generate a unique readiness score or sub-score.

In addition, best practice suggests that states use these tests as anchor assessments to build a ladder of correlations with assessments of earlier coursework, such as creating performance expectations in algebra I and geometry that link to those in algebra II.

c. Setting Test Score Levels to Signify Readiness

States will be challenged when setting the test score levels that signify readiness. Particularly for tests that are also used for high-stakes graduation purposes, there will be pressure to minimize the gap between a valid readiness score and a minimum score required for high school graduation. However, the greatest danger to the goal of improving readiness lies in setting the readiness qualifying scores too low. The scores should be set at a level that signifies the reading, writing, and mathematics learning skills necessary to succeed in first-year college work.

Performance expectation levels should be set according to the following criteria:

- The performance levels should be tied to success in first-year courses in postsecondary education. Validation studies between performance levels on

the readiness standards and performance in first-year courses should be conducted.

- The performance levels should be indexed to the skill levels needed to begin associate and bachelor's degree study at institutions that have open-access, less selective, and moderately selective admissions criteria. The standards should relate directly to the threshold skills needed by students to succeed at these institutions.
- States should set the performance levels without regard to assessment requirements for graduation. All states will have a significant gap between high-stakes graduation test scores and valid readiness scores for postsecondary education. If a state uses the same test for both purposes, the state should set two qualifying scores.
- States need to set performance levels without reference to their impact on remedial education. Remedial education rates in postsecondary education will probably spike in the short term after a state establishes rigorous standards statewide. In addition, adults returning to postsecondary education may continue to need developmental education. Hopefully, however, remedial education rates will decrease over time.
- The qualifying scores should be set at a level that indicates readiness immediately. They should not be adjusted downward to estimate student growth in these skills during the senior year.
- The qualifying scores should be substantially the same as those in placement tests used by institutions of postsecondary education across the state. This will entail conforming postsecondary education placement practice to the specific content standards and performance expectations of the English III and algebra II tests.
- Students who meet the readiness performance standards on the advanced end-of-course tests should be exempted from taking further placement or readiness tests upon admission to a public community college or a university with relatively low selectivity. The exemption for mathematics in a highly selective university might be conditioned upon a student taking a senior-year mathematics course (not necessarily at a level higher than algebra II).

4. School Curriculum

Students identified through the junior year tests as not meeting the readiness standards should be provided senior-year instruction to help them meet the standards before high school graduation. The delivery of the instruction might vary (for example, one or two

semester courses, modules, online or face-to-face tutorials), but the content should be indexed to the skills needed to succeed in college-level courses.

The following points should be considered in developing these senior-year courses:

- The initial focus should be on English/language arts (specifically, expository reading and writing) and mathematics.
- The courses and other activities should be explicitly directed to the students and linked to the performance gaps identified in the junior year readiness tests.
- Successful completion of these activities should earn credit toward the high school diploma.
- These activities should be developed jointly by public school and postsecondary staff, faculty, and teachers.
- A common assessment of student performance on these 12th grade activities should be developed to determine if the students meet readiness standards. If so, the student should be deemed ready and not subject to further placement testing in postsecondary education. Another assessment option might be for students who have completed the recommended 12th grade activities to retake the algebra II and English III exams to achieve a higher score—one that meets or exceeds college readiness.

As states develop this senior-year curriculum, they might examine the work completed by California State University (CSU), especially in reading and writing. Responding to the need to help seniors meet readiness standards, CSU concluded that expository reading and writing posed the greatest challenge to students' being ready for college in California. This led to the development of a wholly different approach for some 12th grade language arts classes. CSU faculty and staff determined that the fundamental reading problem lay in students' limited capacity to read and understand complex texts, such as textbooks in different disciplines, analytical essays, and advanced newspaper editorials and opinion columns. Further, they found that this contributed to the students' limited understanding of math and other disciplines.

Given the importance of this skill, CSU faculty, K–12 public school teachers, and content experts developed a 12th grade expository reading and writing course based on a series of modules designed to help students comprehend and explain academically dense texts. Course assignments emphasize the in-depth study of expository, analytical, and argumentative reading and writing. Designed to prepare students for college-level English, the course also includes an assignment template and an accompanying series of primarily nonfiction texts.

The academic standards it covers are aligned with the official California school content standards. However, the substance of the course—and especially the related

professional development for teachers—extends teachers’ understanding beyond the simple description of a standard (what needs to be known or done) to the actual level of expected student performance (how well something is known or done).

5. Teacher Development

Practicing teachers deserve assistance in understanding the readiness standards and how to teach them. Pre-service teacher programs also need to ensure that all new teachers receive preparation in these areas. Professional development programs for principals and other administrators also need to reflect the standards.

For teacher development, the goal is to build a shared understanding both of the level of challenge or difficulty needed in the curriculum and of the level of student performance to be expected. Practically, this means elaborating on the state curriculum frameworks and providing concrete, shared examples of materials, lessons, assignments, and assessments of student work that will build clearer understandings of expected performance.

The following points should be considered in the professional development of teachers:

- A common, statewide professional development curriculum should be developed to help teachers understand and use the reading, writing, and math readiness standards. State coordination is needed to ensure that the shared understandings of the readiness standards are conveyed consistently.
- Professional development for teachers should feature how the key readiness standards in each relevant course should be understood by content and level of performance.
- The professional development curriculum and activities should be linked to the specific readiness standards and performance expectations in the junior-year readiness exams.
- The activities should include teacher training directly related to the 12th grade readiness courses, such as: how the courses are constructed; the standards and expectations on which they are based; how their materials, lessons, and assignments relate to the performance standards; course assessment rubrics to ensure shared performance expectations; and instructional strategies that are particularly effective in teaching these standards.

6. School Accountability

Recently, some states have made high school graduation rates an important part of accountability. Some progressive state accountability systems are also targeting higher achievement levels, such as the percentage of high school graduates meeting college readiness standards. By including postsecondary readiness measures in statewide

accountability systems, states encourage schools to make readiness a priority. A systemic readiness initiative will be reinforced by a state school accountability program that highlights college readiness and recognizes schools statewide that increase the percentages of high school graduates who achieve the readiness standards.

7. Postsecondary Education Accountability

The commitment of postsecondary education to statewide college readiness initiatives will be strengthened if states hold colleges and universities accountable for helping students succeed in first-year college study and for helping students meet the common readiness standards through their own remedial education programs.

V. STATE FACTORS INHIBITING COLLEGE READINESS INITIATIVES

At the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), we have found several underlying reasons for the lack of progress on statewide college readiness initiatives, some relating to statewide priority and urgency, others to issues concerning public schools or postsecondary education, individually, and, in some cases, jointly. We highlight the key implementation challenges below not to be negative, but because we recognize the complex challenges facing states as they seek to build consensus on how to implement the details of a readiness initiative. The following outline introduces some of the key issues that need to be addressed if statewide college readiness initiatives are to advance effectively.

First, most states do not recognize a significant readiness problem. Research shows that most students are not well prepared to begin college study in language arts, mathematics, or both. Even many students who are not required to take remedial courses are not well prepared for college work, and many professors and college administrators know this. Few states apply one set of readiness standards across all of postsecondary education, with the result that individual campuses or systems set their own readiness or placement standards. Frequently, the standards are lower than they should be. Only a handful of states have formally recognized the huge size of the readiness challenge, but those states that do recognize the magnitude of the problem are more likely to take action toward improvement.

Second, postsecondary education has yet to embrace the improvement of college readiness as a series of concrete actions in its own best interest—as well as in the best interest of every state and the nation. Remedial education still generates per-student funding, and many students who are not ready for college still make their way into degree-credit courses and generate funding, at least until they drop out. Their lack of readiness also provides an explanation for low college graduation rates. Making postsecondary education more accountable for postsecondary completion, while

maintaining access, would force a more serious commitment to readiness, because it is a key factor in certificate and degree completion.

Third, postsecondary education sometimes confuses the need to improve readiness with a threat to college admission or entry. Confusing readiness with admission will only keep states and postsecondary education systems from reaching consensus on making readiness a priority. Broad-access and open-door institutions (which serve a large majority of students across the nation) will not fully embrace a readiness initiative if they believe it will negatively affect access. Therefore, states need to assert that access will be maintained regardless of the readiness agenda. Remedial education will continue, except that there will hopefully be less need for it when more students are prepared for college.

Fourth, a major reason for many stalled readiness initiatives stems from the pervasive national rhetoric that somehow minimum high school graduation requirements must ensure readiness. Improving college readiness includes strengthening high school graduation requirements, but states and higher education systems cannot delay college readiness initiatives while waiting for graduation requirements to rise. All states need to raise high school graduation requirements, increase high school graduation rates, improve student achievement, and ensure that higher proportions of students are ready for college upon completing high school. All of these areas need careful and diligent work from K–12 and postsecondary leaders working together. Rhetoric calling for high school graduation requirements and high-stakes graduation tests to be changed overnight to ensure college readiness for all students in the near term may cause the public schools and key policymakers to question whether higher graduation requirements are realistic. Many states already struggle with low graduation rates in high schools, even under existing requirements and tests.

Fifth, many states may be stymied by the unexamined national rhetoric claiming that the same kind and level of readiness standards are required for all postsecondary options—from on-the-job training, to certificates, to degrees, and so on. We have no empirical evidence supporting such assertions. A better course of action would be to take action in areas we know about, especially readiness for postsecondary degree programs, and seek to build the empirical data for other fields.

Sixth, both postsecondary education and the public schools have been slow to recognize that meeting the college readiness challenge will center on setting specific, measurable performance standards in key learning skills, and having more students achieve them. There is still some confusion over this focus, especially in postsecondary education, which has little experience in performance standards–based education (in contrast to public schools since the 1990s). Postsecondary education tends to see readiness as synonymous with high school courses and grades or with ACT or SAT scores. While rigorous high school courses and good grades are necessary, they do not by any means ensure readiness. The national admissions tests may come closer to indicating student readiness in reading, writing, and math, but they do not provide the precise and

transparent focus on the core standards that high school teachers need for their classroom instruction.

Finally, states have been slow to transform college readiness initiatives into “statewide” efforts. A readiness agenda requires a statewide effort so that all of postsecondary education acts as a body, agreeing on one set of readiness standards and uniformly communicating them to all high schools in a state. Unfortunately, no state has managed yet to get all of postsecondary education—universities and community colleges—to speak with one voice. College readiness will be improved only when high school teachers receive clear and concise signals about standards, backed by all of postsecondary education in their state. State-level policy direction is necessary to provide the framework for public schools and postsecondary education to coordinate their efforts.

CONCLUSION

There have been state efforts over the past decade to improve college readiness, and some of these efforts have moved beyond dialogue to producing some common and best practices in several key areas. As a result, the key components of a statewide college readiness initiative are beginning to be better understood, and several principles have emerged that may help in driving their implementation farther. To date, most state efforts have been narrowly focused on standards and assessments, and, in some cases, have included accountability efforts. However, the Southern Regional Education Board, the California State University System, the State of Texas, and others have sought to develop statewide college readiness initiatives through a more extended set of related steps such as teacher development and curricular change. Nonetheless, no state has effectively implemented all of the needed steps, and, when some steps have been addressed, they have often been carried out in piecemeal ways. This reflects the substantial challenges facing states that seek to develop comprehensive and systemic statewide college readiness initiatives, but it does not diminish the need for this work to be pushed forward in every state, so that more students can be prepared for postsecondary education.