

COMMON

Core State Standards

FOR COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS:

A Leadership Opportunity for Community College Trustees

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“SCHOOL REFORM” HAS BEEN AN AMERICAN PREOCCUPATION for more than a quarter century, but few would claim we have made significant progress toward the goal of widespread educational achievement. Roughly 30 percent of high school students fail to graduate in four years, and the number of students with high school diplomas who require remedial work in college is far too high. We clearly must do something different in order to achieve better results.

Inadequate readiness for college work is not simply a K-12 problem, nor does the full responsibility for remedial education lie with community colleges. Educators at every level and trustees of all colleges and universities have a critical leadership role to play in increasing the knowledge and skills of the American people. No sector and no educator can dodge a share of the responsibility.

If used as a lever on other systemic issues, the recently developed Common Core State Standards in mathematics and English from the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the National Governors’ Association could become a powerful catalyst for significant improvement.

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In part, the Common Core State Standards emerged as a matter of economic necessity — K-12 leaders have found it prohibitively expensive to develop and implement unique standards and assessments for each state. But the educational benefits will be far more significant than the economic benefits. While the important dimensions of human knowledge and skill cannot be exhausted by any compendium of learning objectives, the abilities to use language and perform quantitative analysis are fundamental to everything else.

The Common Core State Standards initiative aspires to: 1) define the knowledge and skills in English and math that, at the end of high school, would signify that a student is ready for success in college or a career; 2) define the learning progression through elementary and secondary education needed to achieve college and career readiness; and 3) provide valid, formative, and summative assessments of student progress toward college and career readiness through each stage of elementary and secondary education.

The guiding principles behind the standards have been “fewer, clearer, higher, evidence-based, and internationally benchmarked.” Virtually all who have studied the Common Core State Standards agree that the capabilities of U.S. high school graduates will be dramatically higher if these learning objectives are widely achieved. Significant educational progress may be within our grasp if educators throughout the United States can stay tightly focused on these learning objectives and develop curricula and instructional approaches that will help students achieve them in far greater numbers. Shared learning objectives, supported by a widely accepted “yardstick” for assessing student achievement, could become an enormously constructive and powerful tool.

Why are common learning objectives needed? Confusing, multiple standards keep students guessing (often wrongly) about their preparation for college and work. States have wasted valuable resources by continually reinventing the wheel independently with no material differences in substance, but too-wide variability in the level of expectation. Simply put, confusing, multiple standards have been an obstacle to educational progress.

A national consensus on math and English-language skills is both possible and highly desirable. In fact, we have always had an implicit consensus in these fields; it is irresponsible not to articulate this consensus clearly.

The Common Core State Standards represent a superior product that is worthy of support. It may benefit from fine-tuning over time, but we should not waste time and effort on tiny refinements before implementing this tool.

Of course, consistent learning objectives and uniform assessments in math and English will not automatically generate more student learning. The potential contributions of common K-12 standards can be realized only if:

- The assessments are widely credible in the postsecondary community.

- Elementary and secondary teachers have the capabilities and the curricula necessary to enable students to achieve these learning objectives. Excellent curricular materials and more effective professional training and in-service professional development are critically important.
- Attainment in math and English is complemented by the other components of a college preparatory curriculum: social studies, science, languages, and the arts.
- All entities with a critical role — teachers, school leaders, and colleges and universities — work together more effectively in implementing the standards and promoting continuing quality improvement.

Many postsecondary leaders are working to promote and facilitate the successful implementation of the Common Core State Standards. How will colleges and universities benefit from these efforts? First, high school graduates who meet the standards will be able to enroll in entry-level college courses in math and English without any need for remediation or further demonstration of capacity. Assessments of attainment of the common standards should replace current placement tests.

Second, high school graduates meeting the standards will be eligible for admission to moderately selective colleges and universities. (We now admit many students who do not meet these standards.) Higher levels of attainment on the standards and specific high school course requirements may be required for admission to more selective institutions or programs.

Third, colleges and universities will be able to demonstrate their relevance and willingness to address a critical national priority — the quality of elementary and secondary education — by providing in-service education for current teachers and developing the capability of new teachers to enable students to achieve these standards. Supporting K-12 improvement is vital to the success of postsecondary education and its public support.

Why are community college trustees so important? More than any other sector of higher education, a community college has the ability to influence the community it serves. Community colleges can help their students be more successful while they are still in high school. Community colleges also can advance the capabilities of K-12 teachers by helping them retool to teach these learning objectives and by giving constructive feedback based on student performance in college.

Effective partnerships between community colleges and K-12 schools in their community can lay a foundation for more widespread educational attainment in the United States. Nothing is more important to our future.



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