

Standards, Assessment, and Readiness: Addressing Postsecondary Transition Issues Across State Lines

The implementation of the Common Core Standards (CCSS) or other similar academic standards is well underway in most states, and the corresponding assessment systems are set to go live in the current academic year. As implementation continues, there are a variety of challenges that K-12 and higher education leaders will face in the coming years related to student movement across state lines. To begin the conversation about these challenges, the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, convened higher education and K-12 leaders from the Western region and additional bordering states in October 2014. The meeting had four goals: 1) to gain an increased awareness of issues related to readiness for college and careers, common academic standards, and assessments that may emerge as students cross state lines to enroll in postsecondary institutions after high school; 2) to forge relationships with colleagues in other states to assist with the ongoing implementation of common academic standards and assessments in the region, particularly where cross-state collaboration is necessary; 3) to identify principles of good practice as a basis for a national framework for preempting some of the obstacles related to student movement across state lines as common academic standards and assessments are implemented; and 4) to determine whether an ongoing conversation (perhaps through a formal network of K-12 and higher education leaders) would be valuable and lead to more successful student transitions. Organized to address four key areas, the October 2014 meeting focused on data and reporting, admissions, college and career readiness, and communications. This brief describes the major challenges ahead for states, institutions, and most importantly, students as the standards and assessments are implemented and offers recommendations to create a network structure that would assist K-12 and higher education leaders in addressing those challenges.

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Background

Created through an initiative led by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers – with input from researchers, policymakers, teachers, and the general public – the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in English language arts/literacy and mathematics describe what students must learn to be ready for college and the modern workplace. In September 2010, the U.S. Department of Education awarded large grants to two consortia of states – the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (Smarter Balanced) – to develop K-12 assessments to measure student progress toward the CCSS. While most states have joined one of the two consortia, not all have, and the composition of the consortia has been somewhat fluid. Utah, for instance, once

a member of Smarter Balanced is developing its own assessment, while Arizona, once a member of PARCC, has recently adopted an assessment called AzMERIT, which is provided by American Institutes for Research (AIR). Alaska has gone yet another route and partnered with the Achievement and Assessment Institute at the University of Kansas to develop and administer assessments for Alaska's public schools.

While the adoption of the CCSS (or similar common academic standards) by all but a few states was unprecedented in U.S. education, the implementation of the standards is in process, and many challenges remain for the new standards to accomplish their intended objective of providing a clear and consistent framework to prepare young people for college and careers. One such challenge relates to student movement; specifically with respect to those students who cross state lines to enter

postsecondary education directly after high school. Students commonly attend colleges and universities in states other than where they graduated from high school and questions loom about how the standards and results from the assessments will be viewed, accepted, and used as students move between states.

To begin to identify the specific challenges that states, institutions, and most importantly, students will face as the standards and assessments are implemented, WICHE held a meeting of K-12 and higher education leaders in the Western region and additional bordering states titled, “College and Career Readiness, Common Academic Standards, and Assessments: Finding Solutions to Cross-State Challenges.” The goals of the meeting, which was held in October 2014, in Broomfield, CO, were to:

1. Gain an increased awareness of issues related to readiness for college and careers, common academic standards, and assessments that may emerge as students cross state lines to enroll in postsecondary institutions after high school;
2. Forge relationships with colleagues in other states to assist with the ongoing implementation of common academic standards and assessments in the region, particularly where cross-state collaboration is necessary;
3. Identify principles of good practice as a basis for a national framework for preempting some of the obstacles related to student movement across state lines as common academic standards and assessments are implemented; and
4. Determine whether an ongoing conversation (perhaps through a formal network of K-12 and higher education leaders) would be valuable and lead to more successful student transitions.

Thirty-three key K-12 and higher education leaders from 17 states and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands participated as well as staff from both assessment consortia.

Challenges

There are four main areas of concern to K-12 and higher education leaders related to the standards and assessments and student movement across state lines. They are data and reporting, admissions, college and career readiness, and communications.

Data and Reporting

Issues surrounding data and the reporting of assessment scores are numerous and complex; there also is a sense of urgency among state leaders because the assessments will be fully implemented in Spring 2015. One of the most important challenges facing states in the next couple of years is to determine how to report scores within and between states and for what purposes. While there are many benefits to the fact that the states will own their own data generated from the assessments, there is a challenge in that there will be no single repository of assessment data associated with individual students, and at this point, no clear mechanism for data transmission. Such a mechanism is needed because the 11th grade assessment scores will indicate to higher education whether a student should be placed into credit-bearing courses in college or is in need of remediation. Further, it is unclear whether existing data systems are prepared to handle this task for in-state students, let alone out-of-state students. Identifying the goals of and creating a framework for these data transactions is critical to the success of the implementation of common academic standards and the related assessments. The assessment scores must have meaning in higher education (in this case an indicator of readiness) or one of the main goals of the CCSS will not have been achieved.

The high school transcript is central to these discussions and corresponding decisions as it may be a mechanism by which scores are reported to postsecondary institutions. Some states intend to report state assessments on student transcripts, while others do not, and some states are in fact prohibited by state law from doing so. This variability in reporting leads to serious questions about how postsecondary institutions will be able to efficiently receive

scores, including whether scores should be part of the application process or only requested once a student is admitted (to be used as a determinant of placement after admission). As such, state and institutional leaders need opportunities to engage in conversations about what types of information is necessary (not just desired) to provide to postsecondary institutions.

In almost all discussions about how data will be used, stored, and transmitted, there are legitimate questions raised about student privacy. To date, specific decisions about the types of uses of the data have not yet been made. It will be vitally important to strike the right balance on these types of issues so that scores are used as intended and privacy concerns are taken into account. While many of these discussions have happened within the consortia, more will need to occur related to the cross-state issues at hand.

Finally, another key question that complicates this process is at whose request are the data sent to postsecondary institutions (i.e., at a student's request versus an automated process initiated by the institution for applicants)? These challenges and questions require deliberate and coordinated conversations among state K-12 and higher education leaders who have the authority to make decisions that can positively impact student pathways from high school to college.

Admissions

The 11th grade assessments in English language arts/literacy and the assessments taken at the end of Algebra II were created to measure student mastery of the CCSS and are not intended for use in admissions. Colorado, however, is one of the few, if not the only state, that will consider scores from the assessment consortia as one of several measures in its admissions policy. While the assessments were not designed for admissions, in its effort to closely align its education system from preschool through workforce, Colorado is moving in this direction, and it is possible that others may look to this strategy as a way to give enhanced meaning to the assessments.

College and Career Readiness

By design the 11th grade assessment in English language arts/literacy and the assessments

taken at the end of Algebra II (which for PARCC is an end-of-course test that can be taken at the end of 10th or 11th grade and for Smarter Balanced is inclusive of all high school content through Algebra II and is administered to all 11th graders) are intended to serve as an assessment of the extent to which students are on track to be successful in entry-level, credit-bearing courses. In other words, they will tell students whether they can be placed into credit-bearing courses without the need for remediation. Ideally, if a student is determined to be in need of remediation, that remediation will be provided to him or her while still in high school.

As part of the U.S. Department of Education's 2010 Race to the Top assessment grants, higher education leaders agreed to this concept and indicated that they would participate in the design of the assessment with the goal of using assessments as indicators of college readiness. The rubber will hit the road so to speak when students who have taken these assessments enter college in Fall 2016; for this system to be effective for students, higher education must actually accept the assessments as at least one of the valid and acceptable indicators of college readiness.

In the meantime, higher education leaders at the state and institutional levels must examine and amend their placement policies to align them to the assessment system that has been put in place in their states and to accommodate students who will be arriving at their institutions from other states. Most states and institutions are only beginning to think about how to change their placement policies to account for the new assessments, whether they are PARCC, Smarter Balanced, or another assessment. In the West, California, Colorado, and Washington are far ahead on this issue; for the most part, however, states and institutions are lagging behind despite the fact that a clear placement policy is critical for student success.

In this comprehensive examination of placement policies that states and institutions are going to be undertaking in the next several months, two things are apparent. First, the revised policies need to be clear and transparent, not only so

that students understand what is expected, but also to secure buy-in from both the K-12 and higher education communities. Second, this is an opportunity to have a fruitful discussion between states about how and whether to incorporate multiple measures of placement in both practice and policy.

To further complicate matters, the two consortia have distinct differences in how they determine what qualifies as college ready. Smarter Balanced recently voted to endorse an approved set of achievement level scores for its states. PARCC, however, will set its achievement level scores next summer after the first round of tests are administered. Smarter Balanced has four achievement levels, whereas PARCC has five performance levels. This difference has the potential to cause challenges for students who cross state lines to attend college in a number of ways. For instance, within the Smarter Balanced achievement levels, Level 3 is considered conditionally exempt. In other words, a student who scores at a Level 3 on the 11th grade assessment is considered conditionally exempt from remedial course work, contingent on evidence of sufficient continued learning in Grade 12. States have the flexibility to determine the meaning of sufficient evidence of continued learning. The challenge for students can occur in several ways. If a student from a PARCC state attends college in a Smarter Balanced state, will that student be considered exempt from remedial coursework or held to some sort of conditional exemption? On the other hand, how might institutions in a PARCC state treat a student with a conditional exemption from a Smarter Balanced state? These are important questions that need to be answered.

Yet another important question that most states have not begun to address is when and how to effectively remediate the students whose 11th grade assessments show that they are not yet college ready. One organization, the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), through the development of Readiness Courses in math and literacy, which are designed to help close the readiness gap while students are still in high school, has been working to help states deal with

this challenge, but there is much more work to be done.

Finally, what this process is also likely to reveal is that there is a need for better assessment literacy across the board, including how to use and incorporate all assessments (e.g., PARCC, Smarter Balanced, SAT, ACT, and placement tests that will continue to be used in various ways) within higher education. A policy conversation among state leaders in the region, including registrars, admissions officers, teacher education faculty, institutional researchers, and staff from advising centers, is necessary to ensure that students have a clear pathway from K-12 to higher education in light of the standards and new assessment systems that are being implemented.

Communications

The need for clear and accurate communications about the standards and new assessments has never been greater. First, communicating what the standards and assessments are, why they are needed, and what it means for students and teachers continues to be an important challenge. If the message about the standards and assessments is not communicated clearly and accurately to all stakeholders, including parents, the resulting confusion and concern could distract from the important effort that needs to be focused on effective implementation.

Second, state and institutional leaders in both K-12 and higher education are challenged by misinformation that is penetrating the public and policy environment. This misinformation could threaten to derail the implementation phase if people are not informed enough to be able to decipher between fact and fiction.

Third, communicating to students and parents about all the changes related to placement and admissions (where applicable) is vital to the success of implementation. Students need to fully understand how these changes will affect their entire postsecondary experience wherever they choose to attend college or begin a career.

Overall, the implementation of the standards and assessments requires effective communication about the new ways of doing business to all the necessary people.

Recommendations

To address the challenges outlined by the K-12 and higher education leaders in October 2014, WICHE recommends creating a network of K-12 and higher education leaders in the Western region and additional bordering states to:

1. Address the complex challenges that will arise as students cross state lines to enroll in postsecondary institutions after high school.
2. Identify principles of good practice.
3. Foster reciprocal arrangements to recognize students assessment results.
4. Help states decipher different state agreements related to 12th grade conditions, the requirements set by states related to the conditional exemption as outlined by Smarter Balanced.
5. Facilitate the sharing of specific resources (e.g., policies, documents, publications, etc.).
6. Foster a national conversation around K-12 assessment with the intent of helping higher education understand different forms of assessment and their use in the two sectors.

Much like the October meeting, the structure of the network must include representatives of K-12 and higher education who are the most knowledgeable about what is happening in their states with respect to the standards and assessments; they must be in the best position to help identify and anticipate the important issues, but also have the creativity and authority to propose solutions.

The network, however, cannot solve each and every problem. Some of the challenges identified are best handled by others in the states, so when necessary, the network members must be willing to identify the most appropriate person to tackle specific challenges. WICHE recommends forming a two-tiered network structure to tackle the challenges with the second tier being nimble and at the discretion of the larger network.

Timing is critical to the development of such a network. The assessments will officially be launched in Spring 2015; students with assessment scores will show up on higher education's doorstep in Fall 2016. These issues

will take time to address, and there is not much time left.

Finally, while states have ample opportunities to work toward their respective consortia goals, they simply do not have the time nor the occasions for the necessary discussions to make transitions across state lines smooth for students. Moreover, opportunities for cross-consortia collaborations are even fewer.

Principles of Good Practice

In creating a network structure that will guide K-12 and higher education leaders as they work together to solve cross-state challenges related to the implementation of common academic standards and assessments, several principles of good practice should guide the effort. The network, should it be formed, will elaborate on these principles.

- **Solve the challenges as a region.** WICHE believes that a regional approach is the best way to tackle the issues at hand. States simply cannot succeed alone when facing cross-state challenges that span so many topics, but a national approach would become unwieldy very fast. A regional strategy offers the opportunity for cross-state work at a manageable scale.
- **Establish a primary group of people who meet and communicate regularly to identify and address issues.** The K-12 and higher education leaders who were invited to the October meeting would form the primary network membership. These leaders were selected based on their knowledge of the relevant issues and their position that affords them the authority to make necessary decisions.
- **Bring the right people together to identify and address specific issues when appropriate.** There must be willingness and acceptance within the network membership that sometimes others within the states are the more appropriate people to handle specific challenges. For the network to be effective and strong, the network leaders will have to delegate as appropriate.

Conclusion

States, postsecondary institutions, and students will face a host of issues as common academic standards and the new assessments are implemented. These issues are related to students crossing state lines as they enter college directly from high school and range from data and reporting to college and career readiness and communications. In the coming months, it will become critical for states and institutions to work through these issues so that students have the clear pathway from K-12 to college and careers that the CCSS intended.

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