



The Common Core State Standards: Implications for Higher Education in the West

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in English language arts and mathematics seek to better prepare students across the nation for college and careers, raising both expectations and achievement in every state that chooses to adopt them. 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 CCSS align college and work expectations through rigorous content and the application of knowledge via the demonstration of higher order skills. To date, all but eight states have formally adopted the CCSS; the only Western states that have not are Alaska, Montana, North Dakota and Washington (which has provisionally adopted them).¹ This unprecedented movement toward common academic standards in K-12 creates important challenges and implications for higher education. As the CCSS are implemented in states, higher education leaders need to be engaged in the discussions and policy changes that will result.

Until states began adopting the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in 2010, each state developed its own set of academic standards, resulting in variability across the nation in what students learn. The CCSS are an attempt to uniformly improve student readiness and success in K-12 and beyond, no matter where they live. The CCSS build upon the best available evidence of what works in the states, in addition to international benchmarks, to ensure U.S. students are prepared to participate in a global economy.

In November 2010, with funding from Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), in partnership with the American Council on Education (ACE) and the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO), hosted a meeting titled, “What the Common Core State Standards Mean to Higher Education in the West.” The purpose of the meeting was twofold. First, WICHE intended to broaden awareness about the CCSS among higher education leaders, many of whom were unfamiliar with the new standards and the role of higher education in their development and implementation. Second, WICHE aimed to engage postsecondary leaders in a productive discussion about the implications of the CCSS. Participants included state higher education executive officers, chief academic officers, policymakers, and other higher education leaders from the Western

region. Representatives from the assessment consortia that are developing assessments for the CCSS (the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC)) as well as numerous policy organizations (including ACE, SHEEO, and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO)) presented information about the development and implementation of the standards and addressed participants’ questions and concerns regarding their impact at the postsecondary level.

In April 2011 WICHE again collaborated with ACE and SHEEO to convene a special workshop on the CCSS. This second meeting was part of the annual meeting of the Western Academic Leadership Forum, which is a group of Western academic leaders at bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral institutions, and chief executives and chief academic officers for systems and state governing boards, whose goal is to exchange ideas and information, share resources and expertise, and collaborate on regional initiatives.

The discussions at these two meetings informed this policy brief, which summarizes the history of the CCSS, assesses the initiative’s progress, and highlights the challenges and implications of the adoption and implementation of the CCSS for higher education policymakers, policy shapers, and institutional representatives in the West.

What Are the Common Core State Standards?

The CCSS are part of a state-led effort to develop a uniform set of academic standards for English language arts and mathematics. The goal of the CCSS is to “provide a clear and consistent framework to prepare our children for college and the workforce.”² Development of the standards included extensive evidence-based research into state and global best practices; incorporation of existing benchmarks developed for the American Diploma Project (ADP) and the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP); collection of data measuring college and career readiness; and the gathering of input from instructors and leaders at every level of education. The CCSS have been developed in only two subject areas; these two subjects, however, are both the building blocks for developing skills in other areas, and are also the subjects that are assessed most frequently for accountability purposes.³

The CCSS for English language arts standards focus on conceptual knowledge and methods beginning in the early grades and establish a progression of what students need to know to be college- and career-ready as they move through the K-12 system. Similarly, the CCSS for mathematics allow students to become progressively more proficient in their understanding and use of math as they move from elementary to middle and high school. While states that use the CCSS must adopt them in their entirety, they are allowed to add up to 15 percent of their own content standards, in addition to the core in English language arts and mathematics. Most adopting states, however, do not plan to alter the CCSS at this point.⁴

It is important to understand that while these new standards are designed to better assess college readiness, they are not intended to indicate whether a student is adequately prepared for postsecondary studies in certain STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields. All students need to be able to meet the minimum standards of the CCSS but many scientific fields require additional student preparation and aptitude.

Development of the Common Core State Standards

While the National Governors Association (NGA) and CCSSO coordinated the state-led effort to create the CCSS, teachers, researchers, administrators, policymakers, higher education officials, and other state leaders informed the development and implementation of the CCSS from the outset. Public feedback was also

solicited throughout the process. While this has been a national effort, it has not been a federal initiative; the federal government was never involved in the development of these standards.

The CCSS were developed using specific criteria, such that they demonstrate:

- ▶ Aligned expectations between high school graduation and college and career success.
- ▶ Clarity and consistency across states.
- ▶ Rigorous content and the application of knowledge through high-order skills.
- ▶ Use of current state standards and standards of top-performing nations as a baseline upon which they are built.
- ▶ Sound basis in evidence and research.⁵

A memorandum of agreement was signed in 2009 between 48 states, the District of Columbia, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, and NGA and CCSSO committing to the development of the CCSS.⁶ After multiple rounds of feedback from states, researchers, teachers, higher education leaders, and the general public, the standards were released on June 2, 2010.⁷ At this time, 42 states, the District of Columbia, and the U.S. Virgin Islands have formally adopted the CCSS and are in the process of implementing them.⁸ While the implementation process will vary from state to state, depending on the laws and rules governing education, a recent study by the Center on Education Policy suggests that most states expect to implement changes to teacher professional development programs by 2012. A number of states, however, anticipate changes related to assessment, curriculum, teacher evaluation, and teacher certification to take until at least 2013.⁹

Once implemented, the CCSS will ideally allow states to share best practices and have the chance to learn and achieve at the same levels across the country. The standards will also be subject to continuous review so they can be updated and improved on a regular basis.

Assessing Progress

In September 2010, using Race to the Top Assessment funds, the U.S. Department of Education awarded significant grants to two consortia of states to develop K-12 assessments to measure student progress toward the CCSS. SBAC is creating a system of adaptive online exams, using “open source” technology. These exams are designed to provide accurate assessment information to teachers and others regarding the

progress of all students, including those with disabilities and English language learners, as well as low- and high-performing students. Specifically, the system will include:

- ▶ Required summative exams, offered twice each school year.
- ▶ Optional formative, or benchmark, exams.
- ▶ A variety of other tools, processes, and practices that teachers may use in planning and implementing informal, ongoing assessment.¹⁰

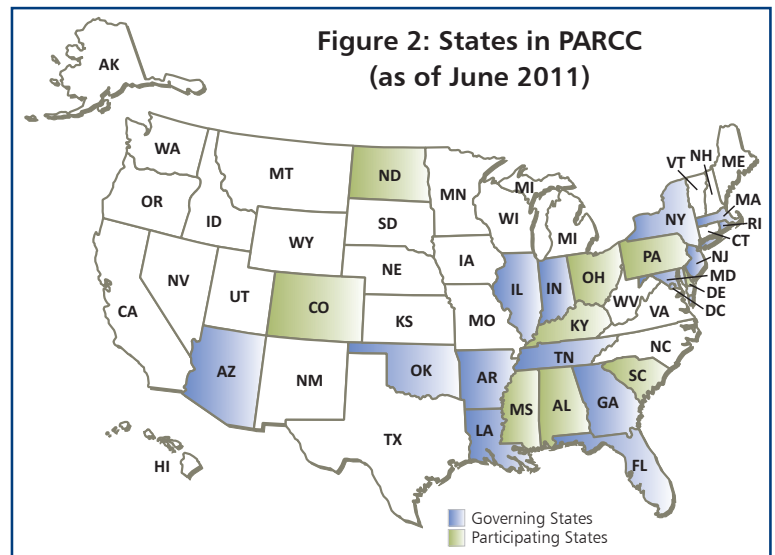
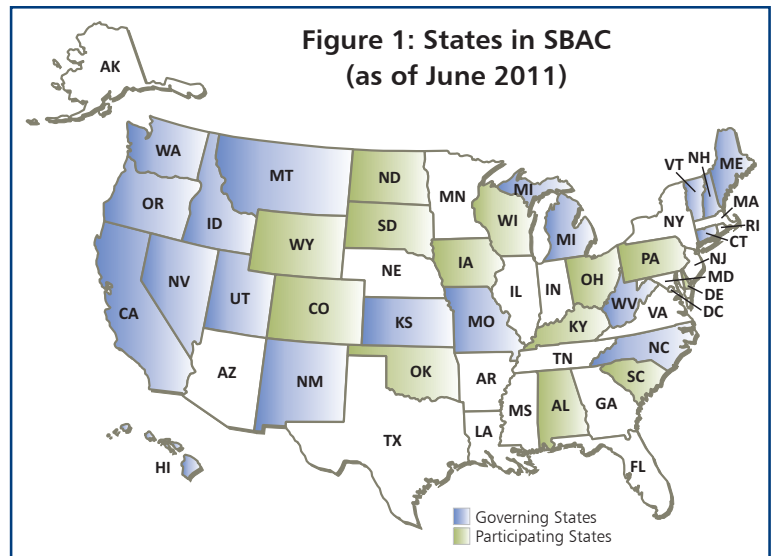
PARCC is developing an alternative assessment system that is based on one common goal: to build the collective capacity of its member states to dramatically increase the rates at which students graduate from high school prepared for success in college and the workplace.¹¹ PARCC’s key features include:

- ▶ “Through course” assessments in each grade and end-of-year tests.
- ▶ A common measure of college and career readiness, including a college-ready cut score to signal readiness for credit-bearing, college-level coursework.
- ▶ Technology-based assessments and reporting.
- ▶ Inclusion of various types of test items that allow for assessment of higher-order skills.
- ▶ Measurement of students’ mastery of the CCSS and mitigation of challenges associated with student mobility.¹²

States can choose to be either a governing or a participating state in each of the assessment consortia. Those choosing to be governing states can commit to only one consortium; participating states can join both. As of June 2011, 30 states have joined SBAC; 23 have joined PARCC.¹³ More Western states have joined SBAC than PARCC, and two Western states – Colorado and North Dakota – have joined both. States have until December 2011 to decide whether or not to participate in either or both assessment consortia. Both assessments will be operational in the 2014-15 academic year.

Role of Higher Education

While the CCSS may on the surface appear to primarily be a K-12 policy issue, there is an important and necessary role for higher education in the implementation of the CCSS. Despite progress toward increased alignment between the K-12 and higher



education sectors in years past, we are far from the goal of a seamless education system. There is hope among some that the effective implementation of the CCSS could bring that dream closer to reality. Currently, however, officials from most adopting states remain unsure about whether their states will align undergraduate admissions requirements or first-year postsecondary curriculum with the CCSS.¹⁴

A recent report by Achieve, ACE, and SHEEO provides guidance to higher education about how to become engaged in this effort and outlines an action agenda.¹⁵ Jacqueline E. King, the report’s author, calls for active participation on the part of higher education leaders and faculty from a variety of disciplines in four key areas:

- ▶ **Defining college readiness and aligning key policies for the school-to-college transition.** This encompasses two key points. First, K-12 and public higher education leaders together must develop a broader understanding of college

readiness that goes beyond English language arts and mathematics as defined by the CCSS, the two areas the CCSS cover. Second, the CCSS can act as a foundation on which higher education can build minimum standards for university or college admissions.

- ▶ **Developing K-12 assessments and aligning college placement policies with them.** To achieve the expected learning gains, the CCSS must be accompanied by valid and reliable assessments (currently being developed by SBAC and PARCC) and mechanisms for holding students and schools accountable. Further, serious questions loom about what the CCSS mean for current structures of standards and assessments, such as the ACT, SAT, and placement examinations.
- ▶ **Aligning K-12 and higher education curricula.** After adoption of the CCSS, the first major challenge to states will be the development of curriculum to support the standards. Changes to the K-12 curriculum will affect what students entering higher education know and are able to do; it is critical that higher education be involved in these discussions.
- ▶ **Teacher preparation and in-service professional development.** Teachers will be expected to prepare students to demonstrate through assessments that they are able to meet the new state standards. Not only will schools of education need to prepare preservice teachers differently, but states will need to provide effective professional development so that current teachers can do the job that will be expected of them. Since there is no funding for professional development provided through this or any related initiative, it will be up to states, school districts, and schools to ensure that the teachers are equipped to succeed.¹⁶

Higher education's involvement in the implementation of the CCSS is critical to their overall success and to the increased alignment between K-12 and postsecondary education that education leaders have been trying to achieve for decades. To reach alignment, however, K-12 and higher education leaders must partner to develop the assessments, guide the long-term implementation strategy at both levels, be actively involved in discussions about the definition of college readiness, and help lay the necessary groundwork for implementing the college- and career-ready high school assessments as valid placement instruments for credit-bearing courses.

While the challenges ahead are real and important, they should not be used as an excuse to delay implementation. Instead, states need to work together across the higher education and K-12 sectors and across state lines. This is an opportunity for both K-12 and higher education to come together at the ground level to align in ways they never have before.

Implications for Higher Education in the West

As noted, likely changes resulting from the adoption and implementation of the CCSS are in areas related to alignment; current structures of standards and assessments; curriculum development and theory; teacher preparation; and collaboration among K-12 and higher education.¹⁷ There are unique challenges and implications for higher education in the West, however, as states in the region work to implement the CCSS.

Wide open spaces. Many of the Western states are characterized by expansive geographical areas and small populations. In states like Alaska, Montana, Nevada, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming, one can drive hundreds of miles between towns and cities and see more wildlife than humans as they make the trek. This defining characteristic will undoubtedly create challenges in some rural districts in implementing the CCSS, particularly with respect to teacher preparation and professional development.

The challenges associated with bringing teachers up to speed to teach to the CCSS is a bifurcated problem. There is the challenge of adjusting teacher education programs to prepare preservice teachers to teach to the new standards, while at the same time revising in-service professional development programs to retrain veteran teachers who have already spent time in the field. Further, the CCSS require a greater and deeper content knowledge than many of the state standards currently in place. Over time, teacher education programs will be able to adjust their curriculum to deal with this; providing meaningful professional development in the content areas in the interim, however, will likely be much more difficult to address. Layered on top of these two challenges, each of which will require distinct strategies, is the dilemma that for some period of time, teachers will be expected to know, understand, and be able to teach to both the state standards that have been in place and the new CCSS.

Many rural areas in the West already find it difficult to hire teachers with the necessary experience and credentials to teach a challenging curriculum. However, many Western states, either through higher education

institutions or through statewide systems, have also already developed robust distance education infrastructures and are experienced in using these resources. Technology can be a powerful tool in implementing the CCSS. Rural states should build on their current capabilities to share implementation strategies both within and across state lines to get more mileage from limited financial resources.

Finally, even in states where the current standards are similar to the CCSS, the assessments will undoubtedly be significantly different from what they have had in place. Historically, states have developed their own assessments that are, at least in theory, aligned to their specific state standards. Regardless of whether a state chooses the assessments developed by SBAC or PARCC, these assessments will be novel: they will be designed by an outside party and use new types of testing designs.

Local control philosophies. The West is known for its emphasis on “local control” in education. Often in policy conversations among state and local education leaders, in response to some suggestion of reform, one hears the phrase, “But we’re a local control state!” The fact is that while most states purport to adhere to this philosophy, over time, local control has been eroded by state and federal legislative involvement, including state efforts to create and enhance academic standards and major federal policy action such as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.¹⁸ The increased state legislative involvement and the lure of federal dollars has diluted local control over K-12 education.¹⁹ As such, local control philosophies are unlikely to trump the implementation of the CCSS. With 42 states (11 in the WICHE West) having already adopted the CCSS, the proverbial train has left the station.²⁰ A recent report further suggests that most states that have adopted or provisionally adopted the standards will not likely change their decisions.²¹

Dominance of Community Colleges. About 14 percent of all students who are enrolled in public postsecondary institutions attend community colleges in the 15 Western states; about 9 percent of all students in the nation are enrolled in California’s two-year institutions alone.²² Questions loom about how the implementation of the CCSS will affect placement processes for students: those entering credit-bearing courses, and especially those entering remedial and developmental education, which is most often provided at the nation’s community colleges. Given the reliance of the West on two-year institutions to serve students,

higher education leaders need to think deliberately about how the CCSS can be used as a tool to improve educational outcomes, thereby reducing remedial and developmental education rates. For instance, leaders at two-year institutions have an opportunity to use the CCSS for purposes of placement into credit-bearing courses, which could potentially allow them to shift resources away from remedial and developmental education to other targeted, and perhaps more successful, efforts related to college completion. If they don’t capitalize on this opportunity, it has the potential to stifle the CCSS effort.

Most discussions about the impact of the CCSS center on students who attend college directly from high school. The fact is that adults (age 25 and older) make up 39 percent of postsecondary enrollments, and many attend two-year institutions.²³ The impact of the adoption of the CCSS and how the standards will be implemented for adult and other nontraditional students remains murky, but for the CCSS to be successful, these issues must be considered and addressed across sectors. For example, older adult students include those who are enrolled in Adult Basic Education (ABE); those who graduated from high school and never attended college; those with some college and no degree; and those who have a degree and are looking reenroll to change careers. These many different types of students need to be assessed in terms of college readiness, and the new high school assessments may not be the appropriate tool. While placement exams are not likely to be omitted from admissions processes altogether, perhaps there are ways to use them more effectively to assess the specific needs of adult students.

Conclusion

The adoption and implementation of the CCSS is a rare, state-led, student-centered opportunity to improve outcomes throughout the entire educational pipeline. The implementation challenges ahead are significant, but they can be overcome with coordination between K-12 and all sectors of higher education. While the challenges and implications for the West may be somewhat unique, through capitalizing on current strengths, such as technology and regional cooperation, Western higher education can take advantage of this unprecedented opportunity to align K-12 and higher education to achieve the ultimate goal: academic success for all students.

Endnotes

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