



Achieving the Benefits of K-12/Higher Education Alignment

I. What Does K-12/Higher Education Alignment Mean?

Why does alignment matter?

Our day-to-day lives rely on many organizations that collaborate to succeed: the restaurant and the produce supplier, the manufacturer and the parts supplier, and the insurance company and the sales agency, to name a few. In each of these examples, the success of one relies on the success of the other—and when both succeed, the customer benefits. When circumstances change, partners must change and adapt to ensure ongoing success.

The same dependency exists between the primary and secondary education (K-12) and higher education sectors. The idea of better aligning and coordinating activity between these two sectors is nothing new. A number of state P-20 councils (e.g., Hawaii and Maryland) have effectively supported collaboration for many years. Legislation enacted in Kentucky in 2009 explicitly called on the two sectors to coordinate efforts to improve student outcomes.

Even with these efforts, evidence still exists of a disconnect in policies and practices between the sectors. Teachers complete an educator preparation program and become licensed but are not ready to teach in the classroom. Educators in each sector are not fully aware of the academic requirements of the other sector. Students earn a high school diploma but struggle with college-level work. They wade through unclear admission and placement requirements, ineffective and disconnected remedial courses, or out-of-date instruction. In the end, many students do not reach the ultimate goal of earning a credential or degree.

These disconnects are a real problem with real consequences for students. Fortunately, today's increased and widespread emphasis on college and career readiness, including the adoption of new standards and assessments, creates an opportunity for even deeper, more meaningful cross-sector synergy. States are realizing that specific alignment strategies focused on new standards and assessments have the potential to help increasing numbers of students reach their academic goals more easily and effectively.

WHAT ARE THE KEY ELEMENTS OF AN ALIGNMENT AGENDA?

This series of briefs provides an introduction to important areas for K-12/higher education collaboration and alignment. Each brief includes basic information, practical advice, vignettes based on real state experiences and a list of resources for additional information:

BRIEF 2: DEFINING COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS. This brief provides an overview of college readiness definitions, processes for their development and ideas for how they can be used. Such definitions often form the basis of a broader K-12/higher education college readiness improvement agenda.

BRIEF 3: ADOPTING NEW COLLEGE- AND CAREER-READY ASSESSMENTS. This brief addresses the dual issues of assessment development and use, including a discussion of placement policies that use new assessments.

BRIEF 4: DEVELOPING AND USING COLLEGE READINESS COURSES. This brief provides basic information about transition and college readiness courses, as well as approaches to their development.

BRIEF 5: ALIGNING GATEWAY COLLEGE COURSES. This brief provides information about how to initiate an effort to build on college readiness standards to align first-year college courses to high school graduation requirements.

BRIEF 6: REDESIGNING EDUCATOR PREPARATION PROGRAMS. This brief addresses the issue of aligning teacher and leader preparation programs to support college readiness goals.

K-12/higher education alignment is essential to state and institutional efforts to improve both college and career readiness and postsecondary completion. This series of briefs, exploring a host of alignment issues, is intended for K-12 and higher education policymakers, administrators, practitioners and advocates. The briefs draw on the experience of leading states working on alignment between these two sectors primarily through the national networks of [Core to College](#) and the [College and Career Readiness Partnership](#).

What are the benefits of aligned education systems?

Improved alignment between K–12 and higher education can produce many benefits.

Student success benefits: Alignment and collaboration can increase student success—in both reaching college and career readiness and persisting in and completing college. Research shows that many students who have not learned the right material before entering postsecondary education and must take even one remedial course in college do not persist to the second year.¹ More than 70 percent of these students will never earn a college credential, and those who do require far more time to reach the finish line. In contrast, in aligned systems, like those emerging in Colorado, Florida and Kentucky, students develop an understanding of the pathway to success. High school students have a clear understanding of what they should know and be able to do by graduation; once they get to college, they benefit from knowing what to expect and from entering a system that is ready to receive them. Increasing the proportion of students entering college adequately prepared for the challenges of higher education translates into more students persisting to a credential or degree—in less time and at a lower cost.

Financial benefits: Any process that operates more efficiently creates a financial benefit. When K–12 and higher education are aligned, students and their families benefit the most. Students make progress and reach success more quickly, reduce wasted time and effort, and emerge having spent less money and with less debt. For institutions, a strong, focused and aligned college readiness and college success agenda translates into higher enrollments, improved retention, improved rates of completion and likely lower loan default rates. Enrolling more students who complete their studies without remediation and without wasted time and effort is ultimately more cost-effective for students, higher education institutions and taxpayers.



Institutional accountability benefits: States hold K–12 schools and districts—and increasingly, higher education systems—accountable for achieving results. Collaborative initiatives can improve academic outcomes for students and thereby improve how schools and districts perform. Fewer dropouts, more students prepared for college, improved course passage rates and higher test scores can reflect well on K–12 school districts through accountability systems that measure these attributes. From the higher education point of view, a greater proportion of well-prepared students enrolling in college results in better institutional outcomes: higher first-year success rates, increased year-to-year retention rates, more on-time graduations and increased graduation rates. These results are particularly important in light of the recent national focus on increased postsecondary accountability, including greater emphasis on performance funding strategies that tie state funding allocations to measurable outcomes.

II. Key Elements of K–12/Higher Education Alignment

Nationwide networks of states, such as Core to College and the College and Career Readiness Partnership, have focused on alignment activities between K–12 and postsecondary stakeholders. A number of key elements fundamental to a collaborative alignment agenda emerge from the experiences of these leaders and form the basis for the five other briefs in this series. The strategies presented in these briefs, outlined below, do not need to be addressed in a prescribed order. Instead, state leaders wishing to reap the benefits of increased cross-sector alignment can begin simply by identifying a couple areas of shared interest and then working together to take action.

1. A clear, shared definition of college readiness, including college and career readiness standards in key academic content areas

A consistent, statewide definition of college readiness sets the stage for alignment across sectors in curriculum, college readiness assessments, educator preparation and development, and remediation policies. A number of states, including Colorado, Hawaii, Massachusetts and North Carolina, have brought together the K–12 and higher education communities to develop a shared definition. The result: Both sectors emerge with a better understanding of what students need to know and be able to do by the end of high school and how the sectors can work together to create the conditions for a successful transition to college. A state's higher education institutions also emerge with a shared perspective on "college ready," which accommodates unique institutional differences, including differences in admission policies, but brings consistency to the idea of "remediation free." This is the subject of **Brief 2: Defining College and Career Readiness**.

2. High school assessments that have meaning for both K–12 and higher education and consistent placement policies that leverage the assessments

Historically, statewide assessments have been the purview of the K–12 system, and higher education institutions have rarely found them useful. Now, with the emphasis on assessing all students for college readiness, higher education's involvement is critical. Colleges and universities can use the results as part of placement decisions. Higher education faculty and administrators should participate in the development and testing of assessment tools to ensure that they align with college readiness definitions and expectations. This holds true whether states adopt one of the exams aligned to the Common Core State Standards that have been developed by the two assessment consortia (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers or Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium), modify their current state assessments, or adapt an existing national exam (such as the ACT or SAT).

NETWORKS OF STATES FOCUSING ON ALIGNMENT

CORE TO COLLEGE is a multistate initiative designed to improve student academic outcomes and college readiness and success through collaboration between the higher education and K–12 sectors on various strategies, including the implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and aligned assessments. A network of 10 states (Colorado, Florida, Hawaii, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Oregon, Tennessee and Washington), Core to College supports activities to define college and career readiness; determine how assessments aligned to college readiness standards could support placement decisions; and further align K–12 and higher education in areas like teacher preparation, transition course implementation, course sequences and use of data.

THE COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS PARTNERSHIP is an initiative of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, the Council of Chief State School Officers, and the State Higher Education Executive Officers to promote postsecondary engagement in implementation of the new CCSS. Seven states (Kentucky, Maine, Massachusetts, Missouri, Oregon, Tennessee and Wisconsin) established cross-sector collaborative networks to address issues that reside at the intersection of the K–12 and higher education systems. Primarily, this work included addressing what is needed for successful use of the CCSS and common assessments of student achievement, both to improve college readiness in K–12 and to make effective use of these assessments for placement and other decisions in postsecondary education.

Building the assessments is not enough. Many postsecondary systems and institutions are examining and aligning policies for admission thresholds, course placement and remediation to reflect new assessments and the statewide definitions of college readiness with the goal of reducing remediation and improving persistence and success outcomes. Effectively communicating these policies to teachers, counselors, students and parents is important so that they have a shared understanding of what a student needs to do academically to enter college remediation free. This is the subject of **Brief 3: Adopting New College- and Career-Ready Assessments.**

3. College readiness courses in high school that ensure that students who are not on track in their junior year have an opportunity to reach readiness by the time they graduate from high school

New common assessments will allow students, their teachers and district administrators to know whether students are on track to college readiness at the end of their junior year. High schools and higher education institutions can collaborate to design and deliver transition courses for use during the senior year to increase the likelihood that students will reach readiness. States also can implement dual enrollment strategies and programs like Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate in high school to further support student readiness goals. This is the subject of **Brief 4: Developing and Using College Readiness Courses.**

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4. Curricular alignment between high school and higher education

Once a state establishes and accepts a working definition of college readiness, the opportunity arises for postsecondary faculty to examine entry-level, nonremedial math and English course curricula to ensure that the courses build on and leverage the college readiness standards implemented in high school. The same alignment should extend to entry-level course curricula in history, social studies and science. This type of alignment is the most visible to the student and contributes significantly to a successful transition from high school to college. The student feels comfortable in the aligned college class because it reflects a logical progression building on what he/she learned in high school. A successful transition is key to student persistence and completion. This is the subject of **Brief 5: Aligning Gateway College Courses.**

5. Preservice and in-service teacher professional development that improves teaching and learning

Teachers are the most important in-school contributors to student learning. States adopting standards that reflect the knowledge and skills necessary for students to be college ready are also working on providing support and training for preservice and in-service teachers on how to implement those standards. Postsecondary partners can help by working with their K–12 colleagues to align teacher preparation programs and professional development options to the expectations of the new standards, including the emphasis on college readiness. K–12 leaders can work with their postsecondary colleagues to ensure that teacher preparation programs include the knowledge and skills that allow new teachers to hit the ground running. This is the subject of **Brief 6: Redesigning Educator Preparation Programs.**

III. Practical Advice for Improving K–12/Higher Education Alignment and Collaboration

Alignment requires collaboration, and collaboration requires fully engaged partners. If both partners commit, up front, to a set of alignment goals and a process by which to reach them, then creating a successful college readiness and student success effort becomes less complicated. The following advice emerges from the work taking place in leading states.

- **Get together; foster a culture of collaboration and shared, committed leadership.** The first step is to find a way to get K–12 and higher education together to identify the shared nature of the challenge and commit to doing something about it. In some states this step is already happening through existing steering committees or system-level partnerships; in others, it may take some effort. Both sectors need to come prepared to share the responsibility for making a difference.

Getting together can either reflect a unique new “college readiness” initiative or leverage and build upon other initiatives currently under way. For instance, Massachusetts created a special joint initiative of the State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and the State Board of Higher Education to prepare a definition of college and career readiness and drive discussions related to system alignment. Many states have existing P–16 or P–20 councils responsible for driving collaboration and shared decision-making to improve student outcomes. Louisiana leveraged already existing campus engagement teams to raise awareness about new state standards and college readiness initiatives. In addition, states may choose to go beyond education players and include representatives of business, the legislature and the community.

State K–12 and higher education leaders can set the example of collaboration and inspire activities at many levels. District superintendents and college presidents can engage with each other to understand specific issues facing their local communities and devise strategies to improve student outcomes. High school teachers and faculty who teach introductory college courses can join together to review syllabi, assignments and student work to gain a better understanding of what is happening in classrooms and how students experience the transition from high school to college.



- Set goals and create a plan.** Collaborations work best if there is a shared vision for the desired results and the ways to make them happen. Once partners have convened, a good first step is to use data to establish measures of progress and set goals reflecting the benefits of alignment. Shared goals then lead to the creation of a plan for how to make progress toward the desired results. After the enactment of key college readiness legislation (S.B. 1 in 2009), the Kentucky Department of Education and Council on Postsecondary Education created a unified strategy—covering such issues as providing targeted interventions to students who are not college ready and increasing access to and the quality of college and career readiness advising—that has guided their work ever since. The strategy contains key goals, including increasing the percentage of students who are college ready when they graduate from high school and reducing the percentage of students requiring remediation in college. The legislative mandate ensures that the various state agencies work together and serves as an accountability mechanism to ensure commitment and action.

While Kentucky developed an expansive scope of work around the key legislation, it is generally not necessary for partners to take on the whole range of issues right from the start. Successful collaborations start by finding one or two areas of focus that the partners are interested in pursuing. Building comfort around collaboration can come through identifying priorities that can attain early and measurable success, such as establishing a common definition of college readiness across sectors or identifying ways to collaboratively expand dual enrollment statewide.

- Establish an implementation infrastructure.** The experience of current leaders in K–12/higher education alignment shows that the work is challenging and difficult and requires significant attention to reach success. Having leadership and staff that focus every day on the agenda and the work needed to forge alignment is essential. The Core to College project supports alignment directors in each of 10 states to lead the alignment and collaboration work. Directors play essential roles in conceptualizing the work, planning specific strategies, convening partners, leveraging networks and achieving results. A dedicated infrastructure is also key to ensuring that engagement and communication activity happen regularly and effectively.



- Seek out promising practices.** A lot of interesting activity is happening across the country that states could adapt to their particular contexts and circumstances. Many states find examples of strong and successful collaboration right in their own backyards—between school districts and local colleges/universities, for example. State examples and case studies in various policy and practice areas are being written up and disseminated. In response to member demand, a variety of national organizations (e.g., American Association of Community Colleges, American Association of State Colleges and Universities, Education Commission of the States, State Higher Education Executive Officers, etc.) are sharing information and featuring presentations at conferences. Other sources of information can include discipline-based organizations with both K–12 and higher education members (e.g., the Conference Board of the Mathematical Sciences, Modern Language Association, National Council of Teachers of English and National Council of Teachers of Mathematics) and advocacy organizations such as Higher Education for Higher Standards.

- **Educate and engage stakeholders; communicate broadly and frequently.** The cross-sector tasks involved in improving college readiness and student success—defining college readiness statewide, revamping teacher education programs, determining college readiness scores on high school assessments—are complex. They require connections within and across multiple sectors (K–12 and higher education), multiple systems within the sectors (networks of districts and systems of postsecondary institutions) and multiple levels within the systems (districts, schools, institutions and disciplinary departments). Networking a critical mass of individuals in a range of key constituency groups is important to developing strategies and building buy-in. Critical among stakeholder groups are high school teachers, college faculty who teach first-year courses, and the administrators or leaders who work with them. As first implementers, they must be involved in decision-making around cross-sector alignment strategies.

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Effective networks include faculty and leadership, practitioners, and policymakers. For example, Massachusetts asked each public higher education institution to convene discussion groups around its college readiness definition. The input from these groups was important in crafting the state's definition and also created strong interest in improving college readiness outcomes. Massachusetts used an online survey to solicit input and comments around its definition. Tennessee had campuses convene groups of high school teachers and college faculty to work on the alignment of college courses to the state's college readiness standards. Louisiana had teams on every campus with members from the college of arts and sciences as well as the college of education.

Engagement beyond education stakeholders also matters. Business, political and community leaders and the general public need to know the effort's goals and aspirations and have opportunities to shape the work. Engagement includes creating opportunities to educate stakeholders on the latest research and key strategies. K–12 and higher education leaders, and particularly college and university presidents, can be important and credible voices helping to emphasize and build support for the need to focus on improving readiness. Their emphatic support can also help reduce the anxiety that often accompanies changes to current practices and expectations. Not everyone can be at every table at the same time; however, the network needs to consider how to engage all pertinent voices.

People want to know what is happening and when. To support and coordinate the work, states can use existing communication mechanisms or develop new ones—newsletters, e-mail news blasts, etc.—and integrate key alignment messages into a broader communications strategy. Some states, such as [Louisiana](#) and [North Carolina](#), launched websites specific to their college readiness agendas. The websites include key policies and updates on initiatives and provide the latest data on progress and outcomes. States can also host special statewide or regional convenings to engage in deeper conversations about college readiness. Such convenings extend the work to more and more communities and campuses where local college readiness initiatives can help more students succeed.

- **Use available data, and strive to have better data.** States possess vast amounts of data that can shed light on the college readiness and student success challenges. Colorado, for example, is using data to generate "District at a Glance" reports for each district and high school that show performance on key college readiness and success metrics. In some cases, states are finding that they need different data to better inform their work—data that focus on key questions rather than simply fulfill compliance reporting obligations. Data can help stakeholders understand the nature and size of the challenge, build awareness, identify improvement strategies, and measure progress. States also want data that can actually help teachers and schools identify concrete steps to help students. Ultimately data can show whether states are moving the needle—especially if states set targets and goals for what they want to accomplish as part of their planning processes.

Endnotes

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Resources

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