

A key lesson from Achieve’s *Taking Root* research on sustaining state education policy change is the importance of connecting and integrating reform policies so that the whole is stronger than the individual parts. Strong alignment between K-12 and the postsecondary community certainly can go a long way towards reinforcing the college- and career-ready graduation requirements, but, more fundamentally, a state’s K-12 and postsecondary systems should be in alignment to signal exactly what students should know and be able to do to succeed in any and all institutions of higher education. For example, at a minimum, students should know what courses and assessments they need to take to be eligible for entry into college, as well as eligibility for state scholarships. It is also incumbent upon a state’s higher education leaders to define the expectations required to enter credit-bearing coursework – and be clear about what it means to be placed in remedial courses.

Advancing this work will require postsecondary systems and institutions to be more clear and transparent about what it means to be college-ready so that key stakeholders – such as high school educators, administrators, guidance counselors, parents and students – receive concrete and consistent signals about readiness.

This brief identifies four specific areas for states to collaborate in aligning high school graduation requirements with college-and career-ready expectations:

- *Align higher education admissions and college-and career-ready graduation requirements;*
- *Provide opportunities for students to earn college credits while in high school;*
- *Build anchor assessments that have credibility and utility with higher education; and*
- *Create a robust communications campaign to articulate what it means to be prepared for higher education.*

Align Higher Education Admissions and College-and Career-Ready Graduation Requirements

There are two particularly effective actions state postsecondary systems and institutions can take to reinforce the alignment of expectations: (1) align admissions requirements to public colleges and universities with rigorous, college- and career-ready high school graduation requirements; and (2) tie need- and merit-based financial aid to completion of that high school curriculum. State higher education system(s) should collaborate with K-12 leaders to align the minimum requirements for admission into public institutions with the college-and career ready course of study. Currently, over half the states’ high school graduation requirements are lower than the requirements for admissions into the public four-year institutions (or flagship institution) – meaning a student can earn a high school diploma in a number of states and fail to meet the entry requirements for the state’s public postsecondary schools. This change should be phased in to give schools and districts enough time to upgrade their curriculum offerings and graduation requirements.

State Examples: Indiana and Arkansas

The Indiana General Assembly made completion of Core 40 a graduation requirement for all students beginning with those entering high school in fall 2007. The legislation also made Core 40 a minimum college admissions requirement for the state’s public four-year universities beginning in fall 2011, although most of the public four-year universities already had set minimum requirements at or near this level. In fact, in some institutions, Core 40 is the minimum, and institutions have built additional admissions course requirements on top of the Core 40. The state’s two-year institutions recommend, but do not require, completion of the Core 40. Students who complete the Core 40 curriculum and meet income eligibility financial aid requirements can also receive up to 90 percent of approved tuition and fees, while students who graduate with a Core 40 Academic Honors Diploma can receive up to 100

percent of approved tuition and fees. Additionally, some colleges in Indiana offer their own scholarships, on top of the state scholarships, specifically for students who earn the Academic Honors diploma.

Since 2002 Arkansas high school graduates have been required to complete a core curriculum recommended by the Arkansas Higher Education Coordinating Board to earn unconditional admissions to the state's public four-year colleges and universities. Starting with the graduating class of 2004, that core curriculum has been aligned to the requirements for the college- and career-ready Arkansas Smart Core high school curriculum. Students who do not complete the Core Curriculum Requirements for Unconditional Admissions must meet additional statewide and institution-specific requirements to qualify for Conditional Admission. These include, at a minimum, completing twelve hours of core academic courses and any necessary remedial courses with a cumulative grade point average of 2.0. The Arkansas Department of Higher Education offers an Academic Challenge Scholarship to students who complete the Smart Core curriculum and meet a set of eligibility requirements, including demonstrated financial need and minimum GPA and ACT scores. The scholarship provides students an award of \$2,500 for the first year of attending an approved Arkansas college or university in a program that leads to an associate, associate of applied science or baccalaureate degree or a nursing school diploma.

Providing Opportunities for Students to Earn College Credits while in High School

States should support dual enrollment, or similar policies, and place an emphasis on accelerated learning and college experience by valuing and incentivizing students to earn college credits in high school, including students those who are disengaged and struggling in high school. Taking college courses while still in high school shows students the level of academic work that is required to enter and succeed in college. College coursework can challenge and raise the aspirations of youth who are struggling to persist in and complete high school and serve as a bridge for first-generation college-goers who might feel that college is “just not for them.” In addition, earning college credit can help low-income families lessen the time to a degree and lower the overall costs of higher education.

K-12 accountability systems can send a clear message to schools that they expect students to graduate prepared to succeed and highly value efforts made for students to earn college credits while in high school by factoring this into the K-12 high school public reporting and accountability systems.

State Example: North Carolina's Learn and Earn High Schools

North Carolina embarked on an ambitious effort to create a system of small high schools as part of a statewide high school redesign effort. Part of this effort was the design and implementation of “Learn and Earn” high schools—early college high schools designed to enable thousands of students across the state to earn both a high school diploma and up to two years of college credit or an associate's degree, tuition-free, in five years. Faculty from K-12 and higher education have worked together to integrate course offerings and provide a seamless system of early awareness and college preparatory academic and exploratory experiences to young people starting as early as sixth grade. Currently there are 69 Learn and Earn Early College High Schools across the state.

In addition, over the past three years, the initiative has evolved to leverage online learning, further enabling students to earn both high school and college credit for completed courses. Online courses are offered from the University of North Carolina system through UNC-Greensboro's iSchool and from participating NC Community Colleges.

A primary support vehicle for this work is the North Carolina New Schools Project (NSP), a public/private partnership that operates as the state’s premier school development entity. The NSP was launched to coordinate statewide high school reform efforts, as well as to provide technical assistance and resources to local partners to plan or redesign the new small high schools. The NSP provides partners with colleges and universities, state and local government, and supporters in the private and philanthropic sectors and provides multi-year implementation grants to selected schools to develop innovative new models of teaching and learning. <http://newschoolsproject.org/page.php>.

Build Anchor Assessments that have Credibility and Utility with Higher Education

Beyond aligning admissions and graduation requirements, K-12 and higher education leaders have other levers at their disposal to set shared signals of college and career readiness. Notably, postsecondary leaders and institutions have a vital interest and key role to play in designing assessments (capable of measuring college readiness) administered at the end of high school that can be used to “anchor” the K-12 assessment system. Most states, however, are not used to such collaboration in managing their assessments; higher education leaders or faculty members are rarely invited into the K-12 assessment development process and when they are it’s usually to provide additional insights into pedagogy or psychometrics rather than to define college-ready expectations. This needs to change. For an anchor assessment to have credibility, especially in the higher education community, both the tests’ content and cut scores have to be grounded firmly in what it takes to be successful in higher education. Specifically, the higher education community should work with K-12 on:

- **Alignment of content.** Higher education should work with K–12 systems to develop anchor assessments that reflect the breadth and rigor of the content needed for entry into credit-bearing, entry-level postsecondary courses, without the need for remediation. To do so, postsecondary faculty, as well as campus leaders from two- and four-year institutions and system offices will need to review test questions and, if important college-ready knowledge and skills are missing, identify how the test can be augmented to better measure those content and skills.
- **Evidence of validity for intended uses.** Postsecondary faculty, as well as campus leaders from two- and four-year institutions and system offices likely will need to validate that the tests measure the content and skills most important for success in freshman college courses, participate in determining the test’s cut scores, and engage in validity studies to evaluate whether the high school assessments provide accurate information about student readiness for credit-bearing courses. States will need to conduct validity studies to verify that anchor assessments focus on college-ready content and skills and accurately predict that students who perform well on the tests have a strong likelihood of succeeding in entry-level, credit-bearing college courses. Some of the validity studies that could provide evidence include:
 - *judgment studies*, in which faculty members review test items for their relevance to entry-level college courses;
 - *concurrent studies* that compare scores from the anchor assessments to the scores of college admissions tests such as the ACT and SAT, which could help to establish concordance scores when the assessment becomes operational; and
 - *cross-sectional studies*, where the exam is administered on college campuses in various levels of classes to which the assessment content is aligned to help determine the anchor assessment score that would indicate readiness for that course.

- **Provide incentives for student performance.** Signaling readiness and awarding placement are incentives that will make anchor assessments matter to students. In addition to course placement, tying additional door opening incentives, such as financial aid or scholarship programs and consideration during the college admissions process also can motivate and support student success.
- **Help enable K-12 to use the results of anchor assessments to provide supports for students who are not yet college ready.** The anchor assessment signals to individual students their readiness for credit-bearing work; it is equally important that the anchor assessments also identify students who are not yet ready for college early enough in high school to ensure they receive the supports and additional instructional to close that readiness gap. For example, students who do not meet the college-ready level on the assessment should be encouraged to take a rigorous course load their senior year, and should have access to specialized curricula and support to help get them ready for the next step. As states raise the bar, so that *proficient* on the anchor assessment means *prepared* for students' next steps, it's likely that college readiness performance will be low, at least initially.

State Example: California's Early Assessment Program

California's Early Assessment Program (EAP) is widely recognized as one of the most innovative programs for assessing high school students' readiness for postsecondary education. The California Department of Education (CDE) and California State University (CSU) system co-developed the EAP in order to address high remediation rates. The EAP builds on the state's existing 11th-grade high school test in English and mathematics, the California Standards Test (CST), as well as the Algebra 2 end-of-course state test. After a collaborative process in which CSU faculty examined the CST test content and discovered that a good deal of the content needed to be college-ready was already included, CSU leaders had test developers create a special "Part B" with 15 additional multiple-choice questions in mathematics and 15 additional questions and a 45-minute essay in English.

Participating in Part B is voluntary and is geared toward students who are taking college-preparatory courses, yet test taking is increasing rapidly. In 2008, nearly 353,000 high school juniors volunteered to take the EAP, 79 percent of eligible students. In August 2007, EAP test results were included for the first time on the K–12 score reports sent to all parents. EAP results indicate that students, by and large, aren't college-ready. In mathematics, only 13 percent were ready for college-level credit-bearing courses; an additional 42 percent were "conditionally-ready," while 44 percent were not ready. (Conditionally-ready students must take additional mathematics coursework in their senior year.) Only 17 percent were college-ready in English.¹

Because one of the goals of EAP is to help students identify gaps in their skills if they are not ready for college-level classes in mathematics and English, the EAP enables high school students to adjust their senior-year coursework if they need additional preparation for college. In order to make the senior year count, CSU designed the CSU Success Web site (www.csusuccess.org) explicitly for students (though it also is used by teachers) to create a step-by-step personalized road map to postsecondary education. The site includes preparation tools, testimonial student videos, access to each student's EAP scores and e-mail reminders about key college-going milestones and deadlines. K–12 and higher education leaders also worked to modify and improve 12th-grade high school courses by providing online English language arts and mathematics modules.

¹ California State University, *Early Assessment Program Participation and Results*. Available at <http://eap2008.ets.org/Viewreport.asp>.

Teachers also receive targeted support. CSU reports it has held numerous EAP awareness sessions across the state for teachers of all backgrounds and experience levels and hosted online workshop and in-person full-day sessions at various locations and free of charge to high school mathematics teachers. Information about the content standards most needed for college readiness, what college proficiency levels look like and general EAP information is also now embedded in CSU's pre-service and in-service programs for teachers and administrators. This is particularly noteworthy because the CSU system prepares between 55 and 60 percent of California's new teachers.²

Create a Robust Communications Campaign to Articulate what it Means to be Prepared for Higher Education

A number of states have developed web-based college access sites to provide students with critical information on what they can be doing in middle and high school to prepare for college and careers, on the states' various postsecondary institutions (to help students find the best fit), and on financial aid and scholarship opportunities. These sites all aim to make the college application and enrollment process clearer for students but also have an important readiness component that clearly communicates postsecondary expectations to students, parents, guidance and career counselors, and educators alike.

As states formulate messaging for students and families, they should consider leveraging existing national campaigns that support college readiness and access. For example, the State Scholars initiative, Academic Competitiveness Grants, National College Access Network and Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs sites, as well as campaigns like those funded by the Lumina Foundation in various states, can be leveraged as partners, offering greater penetration and distribution. In addition, individual colleges focus a tremendous amount of resources on student recruitment and institutional marketing. These materials provide the opportunity to reinforce preparation and alignment messages, in particular around encouraging students to complete a college- and career-ready curriculum before entering college.

State Examples

- Hawaii's Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP), in partnership with the University of Hawaii System, Hawaii Department of Education and community partners, developed a website providing crucial information about college preparation, access and financial aid. GEAR UP Hawaii offers a number of programs and services, such as learning skills courses, preparation for college placement tests, a college awareness month (for which GEAR UP developed a comprehensive advocacy kit), and the GEAR UP Scholar program, which encourages middle school students to earn the optional, college- and career-ready "Step Up" diploma. <http://gearup.hawaii.edu/>
- Learn More Indiana offers a host of information on college and career access, with overviews of Core 40 graduation and assessment requirements, the various two- and four-year postsecondary options across the state, admissions requirements, and financial aid and scholarship options. Those interested are able to order materials through Learn More Indiana, such as "Indiana's Guide to Paying for College: An Introduction for Families and Students" and inserts for graduation plans that contain grade-specific checklists, goals and an extra-curricular activity log to chart students progress towards college and career readiness. <http://www.learnmoreindiana.org/>

² California State University, *Standards-Based Teacher Preparation in the California State University: Annual Report*, 2006.



- College for All Texans' website provides planning resources, financial aid details and a link to a college readiness diagnostic assessment offered by University of Texas System. <http://collegeforalltexans.com/>
- Oklahoma's Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) initiative, led by the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, builds awareness about the importance of postsecondary education, early planning and the potential for financial support. The campaign is aimed at students from 5th grade through high school, parents, teachers, counselors, education policymakers, legislators and the general public. One valuable project of GEAR UP Oklahoma is the state's 40-plus Plan4College centers, which provide students and parents with a one-stop shop for college access information. <http://www.okhighered.org/gearup/>