



# Defining College and Career Readiness

## I. What Is a Common Definition of College and Career Readiness?

### Why does a common definition of college and career readiness matter?

In daily life, we often take for granted the importance of a shared understanding of commonly used terms. For instance, when a grocery store sells a pound of butter or a gallon of milk, shoppers have little doubt as to how much they will get. Imagine the confusion that would ensue if the meaning of "a pound" or "a gallon" were different among buyers or between buyers and sellers. Yet this is not far from what we encounter when we discuss the meaning of "college ready."

An ACT study illustrates the problem.<sup>1</sup> When ACT asked college faculty whether incoming freshmen were college ready, only 26 percent said "yes." Yet when ACT asked the same question of high school teachers, 89 percent said the same students were ready. The study shows a troubling disconnect across sectors about what it takes to be college ready. This disconnect contributes to the fact that, every year, a significant percentage of high school graduates discover only after enrolling in college that they need to enroll in remedial courses before they can take a credit-bearing, college-level class.

What drives this gap? Historically, the K-12 and higher education sectors have not come together to develop a shared vision of what it means to be college and career ready. Over the past 30 years, K-12 systems have adopted statewide standards and assessments and have defined what it means for students to be proficient in various subject areas at each grade level. But achievement of the ultimate credential of K-12 completion—the high school diploma—does not necessarily signify that a student is college ready, at least by higher education standards. In 2005, the American Diploma Project Network, initiated by Achieve, began to examine policies that could give real meaning to the high school diploma as a credential of learning.<sup>2</sup> David Conley, leading scholar and head of the Educational Policy Improvement Center, has published results of similar research on an ongoing basis since 2007.<sup>3</sup> The results of these efforts point to the real need for K-12 and higher education to develop a shared vision of college and career readiness.

### WHAT ARE THE KEY ELEMENTS OF AN ALIGNMENT AGENDA?

This is the second in a series of briefs that provide 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. The other briefs are:

- BRIEF 1: Achieving the Benefits of K-12/Higher Education Alignment.
- BRIEF 3: Adopting New College- and Career-Ready Assessments.
- BRIEF 4: Developing and Using College Readiness Courses.
- BRIEF 5: Aligning Gateway College Courses.
- BRIEF 6: Redesigning Educator Preparation Programs.



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](#).

Achievement in English and mathematics is at the core of most higher education course placement policies. Improving college readiness starts with implementing strong K–12 standards in these two content areas, whether through the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) or other rigorous college and career readiness standards. For many states, the CCSS in English language arts (ELA)/literacy and mathematics have formed the foundation of a college readiness definition. Designed with input from both high school teachers and higher education faculty, the CCSS are aimed at ensuring that students reach college readiness by the time of high school graduation.

While strong standards in English and mathematics are a good start, students need more to be ready for college. The sidebar “Components of a College Readiness Definition” contains a more comprehensive list of components to consider in developing a state definition of readiness.

**Today, many states are not only developing and adopting definitions of college and career readiness but also using those definitions to drive a multifaceted strategy to improve student readiness for success.** A common definition, developed collaboratively across sectors, creates both a unifying foundation among educators and a common language and focus about how best to prepare students for college. To students and parents, a common definition provides a consistent and understandable signal about the importance of getting ready for college. Getting more students ready for college before they enter a postsecondary education program can have a tremendous impact on academic success and college completion—key areas of focus for higher education. Such efforts can then have a substantial payoff when more students graduate from college with meaningful credentials and degrees, adding to the quality of the workforce.

## What is higher education’s role in defining college and career readiness?

Institutions of higher education know firsthand the student experience—what happens when students are ready for college, and what happens when they are not. They are an essential voice in developing a definition of readiness and signaling what students need to do to get ready. They can also illustrate the importance of readiness to degree or credential completion. Increasingly, higher education leaders are stepping up to join their K–12 colleagues to take ownership of the challenge of getting more students to readiness. Higher education can serve as a convener and active participant in definition discussions, bringing research expertise to the table, as well as the perspectives of faculty who teach entry-level courses. Higher education can support data collection and analysis and inform state and institutional policy strategies that set a state’s college readiness agenda. Higher education can be more involved in students’ high school experiences through dual enrollment and transition courses, both of which can help students reach readiness and better understand the rigors of the college experience. Higher education can also play a role in broadly communicating readiness requirements and recommended steps for students to ensure that they are ready when they graduate from high school.

### COMPONENTS OF A COLLEGE READINESS DEFINITION

Definitions of college readiness vary by state, but most draw from a subset of the following components:

- **ACADEMIC CONTENT KNOWLEDGE**—defined by rigorous standards in core content areas such as English, math, science and social studies and measured by:
  - High school course-taking requirements;
  - High school grade point average; and
  - State assessments and national college-entrance exams (ACT, SAT).
- **COGNITIVE STRATEGIES**—problem formulation, research, collaboration and communication skills.
- **META-COGNITIVE SKILLS AND TECHNIQUES**—persistence, self-awareness, motivation and help-seeking.
- **TRANSITION KNOWLEDGE**—skills for succeeding in the postsecondary context, such as understanding norms and values, applying for admission and financial aid, etc.
- **EARNING COLLEGE CREDIT BEFORE ENTERING COLLEGE**—Advanced Placement, dual enrollment and International Baccalaureate.

## II. Practical Advice for Defining College and Career Readiness

A number of states have moved down the path of developing college readiness definitions. The following advice, based on the experiences of some of these leading states, can inform and support the efforts of states seeking to establish their own college readiness definitions.

### **1. Create and support an inclusive and collaborative process to develop a definition; learn from other states' experiences.**

The real power of developing a shared definition is in the collaborative nature of the work. States can design processes that bring many voices to the definition development process and allow broad input. States do not have to start from scratch. They can use the work of other states and the definitions that have been adopted as a starting point for discussions. Through the development process, both K–12 and higher education sectors, as well as other key stakeholders, take ownership of a shared statewide definition and emerge with a better understanding of how they each can contribute to the overall goal: more students graduating college ready. For states such as Colorado, Hawaii, Massachusetts, North Carolina and Oregon, the initial collaboration around the development of the definition later grew into efforts to identify strategies and actions to help more students reach readiness. Those involved in the work also become natural advocates for a state's readiness agenda.

### **2. Broadly and authentically engage stakeholders and the public, beginning with high school teachers and college faculty who teach entry-level courses.**

For a definition to take root and spur change, policymakers and educators need to view college readiness as a community goal and a shared aspiration. It is especially important to engage high school teachers and college faculty;

they will respectively prepare and receive the students in question. As part of their definition development processes, Hawaii and Massachusetts conducted regional discussion groups, creating opportunities for teachers and faculty to interact. This type of process can lead to a number of benefits beyond the development of the definition, including localized collaboration around the needs of students in a specific community. Moving beyond the education sectors, the process can also engage the business community, social service organizations, nonprofits, parents and the general public. This engagement ensures that more people are able to contribute and to see how their work connects with the larger goal. The greater the buy-in, the more likely efforts among various stakeholders will align with the shared goal of increased readiness for postsecondary work.

### **3. Do not view the definition as the end product. Consider how a definition could drive strategies and actions to improve readiness outcomes.**

States should not create a definition simply as a task to complete and check off as done. The definition serves as a foundation for strategies and actions that K–12 and higher education systems can develop and deploy jointly and that can lead to improving student readiness. After Hawaii adopted its definition in 2013, its P–20 Council began to use it to inform other collaborative work, including the development of transition courses and the reform of teacher preparation. When designing a definition, it helps to consider some of the ways in which states might use it, such as:

#### **Transition strategies:**

- High school transition (or readiness) course design and implementation;
- Early-college high school and dual enrollment expansion;
- Service learning initiatives;
- Higher education placement policy; and
- Higher education developmental education reform and gateway course redesign.

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**System improvement strategies:**

- Local high school-higher education campus collaboration;
- Accountability systems focused on college readiness (college readiness report cards);
- Statewide transfer and articulation policies;
- Teacher preparation and in-service professional development; and
- Communications strategies for college readiness, access and success information.

**4. Once adopted, communicate the definition broadly and in ways people can easily understand.**

Successful states develop and implement communications strategies around the content of their definition, why it matters and how people can support it. States can weave such a communications strategy into other communications efforts that focus on college access, success and even financial aid. Aspects of the communications strategy should address specific audiences—college faculty, high school teachers, counselors, parents, students, business leaders, the general public, etc. Separate messages and messaging strategies allow state leaders to specifically target the information needs of each audience.

### III. Actions in States: Colorado and Massachusetts

#### Colorado

In Colorado, the State Board of Education and the Commission on Higher Education jointly adopted a statewide postsecondary and workforce readiness (PWR) definition in June 2009. The term "postsecondary and workforce readiness" is Colorado's chosen phrase to reflect the concept of college and career readiness. The state's definition has served as a North Star for developing and aligning a number of critical reforms.



The Colorado Achievement Plan for Kids (CAP4K)—bipartisan legislation enacted in 2008—required the development of a common definition. The intent of CAP4K was to improve Colorado's public education through alignment of preschool through postsecondary expectations, policies and practices. In response to the legislation, the two departments jointly convened 13 regional meetings around the state between November 2008 and June 2009. The purpose of these meetings was to engage local communities and businesses in conversations about the skills and competencies students need to succeed after high school.

Based on this input, state staff created a draft definition and invited stakeholder groups and the public to review and comment on the draft. By the end of June 2009, both the State Board of Education and the Commission on Higher Education had adopted the final PWR definition.

The PWR definition has had a broad impact on a number of features of education policy in Colorado, including:

- Forming the foundation for Colorado's PWR endorsement on the state's high school diploma (documentation of a graduate's readiness to enter postsecondary education or the workforce);
- Supporting the state's Individual Career and Academic Plan process, available to all high school students;
- Informing the state's high school graduation guidelines and accountability system; and
- Providing the foundation for the state's higher education placement and remediation policy.

## Massachusetts

In 2011, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and the Department of Higher Education began a process to define college and career readiness. This work was part of the state's effort to improve college and career readiness outcomes for its students, as well as a component of its participation in the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) consortium. The two departments appointed a statewide coordinating council to oversee the development of a definition. All public colleges and universities established campus engagement teams composed of P–16 educators. The council charged each team with developing a statement on college readiness and submitting a report of their collective progress and product to the statewide coordinating council.

State staff synthesized the input from the engagement teams into a draft definition and then released it for public feedback and input. More than 1,360 Massachusetts citizens took part in an online survey about the definition. Their comments led to a modified draft definition, and in early 2013, the state conducted another round of public review and comment. After final revisions, each board adopted the definition in spring 2013.

The essential learning competencies in the Massachusetts definition focus on ELA/literacy and mathematics, which are the specific academic areas that will be assessed by PARCC and then used in the postsecondary environment to help determine placement into entry-level, credit-bearing courses. This focus creates a unity among the definition, the assessments and postsecondary placement policy, which clearly signals to students and parents what is required to enter college remediation free.

**“The process itself is almost more important than the words that end up on the paper. The process required collaboration between K–12 and higher education. Conversations and understandings shared back and forth (across the sectors) are what make the words actually work.”**

—**Sue Lane**  
Senior director of alignment and engagement  
Massachusetts Department of Higher Education

## Endnotes

1. ACT, Inc. (2012). National Curriculum Survey. [www.act.org/research/policymakers/pdf/NationalCurriculumSurvey2009.pdf](http://www.act.org/research/policymakers/pdf/NationalCurriculumSurvey2009.pdf).
2. The American Diploma Project. [www.achieve.org/adp-network](http://www.achieve.org/adp-network).
3. Conley, D.T. (2007). *Toward a More Comprehensive Conception of College Readiness*. Eugene, OR: Educational Policy Improvement Center. <https://docs.gatesfoundation.org/documents/collegereadinesspaper.pdf>.

## Resources

Achieve. *Closing the Achievement Gap: 2014 Annual Report on the Alignment of State K–12 Policies and Practice with the Demands of College and Careers*. January 2015. [www.achieve.org/files/Achieve-ClosingExpectGap2014%20Feb5.pdf](http://www.achieve.org/files/Achieve-ClosingExpectGap2014%20Feb5.pdf).

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