

**The
Common
Core
State
Standards:**

Closing the School-College Gap

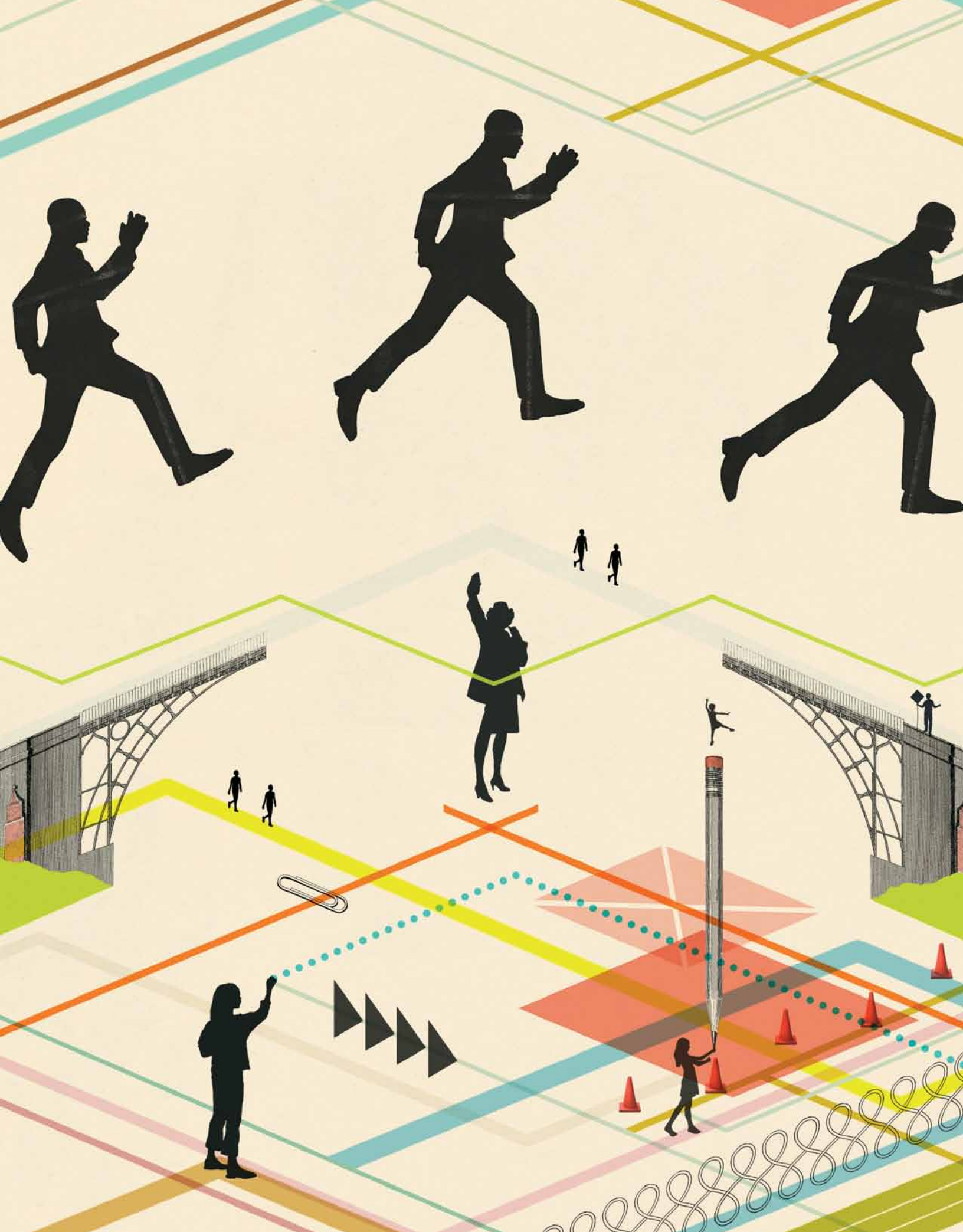


TAKEAWAYS

- 1** Historically, K–12 and higher education have had a distant relationship, but the two sectors are realizing that they must work together to define the knowledge and skills students need to succeed in college and determine ways to help students obtain them.
- 2** Too many American students require remediation upon entering college, a performance gap with long-term consequences. A joint career- and college-ready agenda—one that includes new common-core standards in the fundamental subjects of math and English-language arts—is the solution.
- 3** Boards are encouraged to actively support efforts to build a culture of collaboration with K–12 and to align key policies and priorities of student retention and graduation with the new standards.

**BY JACQUELINE E. KING AND
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MANY BARRIERS CAN PREVENT STUDENTS FROM entering and succeeding in college, including financial difficulties, family obligations, and personal problems. However, the most significant impediment is inadequate academic preparation. As higher education widens its focus from college access to degree completion, a new relationship between K–12 and higher education is necessary.



Higher education institutions and schools must collaborate to define the knowledge and skills students need to be ready for college and to determine the most effective means of helping students meet those expectations. And leaders of colleges and universities, including boards of trustees, can play a key role in encouraging that.

Despite the critical need for collaboration between K–12 and postsecondary education to ensure that students graduate from high school ready to succeed in college, the two sectors have traditionally maintained an arm’s length relationship. Postsecondary educators have not communicated effectively to their K–12 counterparts what students need to know in order to be ready for college, and K–12 has limited understanding of which academic skills will ensure student success in higher education. The two sectors have distinct cultures and have operated, for the most part, independently of each other.

That is changing. A national movement is bringing educators together from across the Pre-K to 16 continuum with a common goal: re-establishing the United States as an international leader in educational attainment. Across the country, educators are working together in ways they never have before to put in place the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) that define the core competencies in mathematics and English-language arts students need to succeed in college and their careers.

In December 2010, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) released results from the 2009 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), a test of academic skills among 15-year-olds in 65 developed nations. The outcomes were discouraging, with students in the United States ranking, at best, “middle of the pack,” scoring 14th in reading, 17th in science, and 25th in math. In all categories, students in South Korea, Finland, Hong Kong, China, and Canada outperformed students from the United States. Especially disturbing was the fact that even the top performers in America do not perform as well as other countries’ top performers—and the United States has more students performing at the low-

est level compared to other developed countries.

This performance gap has long-term consequences: Too many American students require remediation upon entry to colleges and universities, which jeopardizes their ability to complete a degree. Moreover, business leaders report that the majority of students graduating from American colleges and universities do not possess the analytic and problem-solving skills necessary to be successful in the work force.

The need is clear, as is the solution: States, K–12 education, and postsecondary education must collaborate on a career- and college-ready agenda. The adoption of the CCSS by 45 states and the District of Columbia, coupled with new college-ready assessments, provides an historic opportunity to ensure that all high-school students graduate ready for careers and postsecondary education.

The Common Core State Standards

In 2009, 48 states, two territories, and the District of Columbia signed a memorandum of agreement with the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). They committed to a state-led process: the Common Core State Standards Initiative. On June 2, 2010, the standards were released.

To develop the standards, the CCSSO and the NGA worked with representatives from participating states, as well as a wide range of educators, content experts, researchers, national organizations, and

community groups. The standards:

- Align with college and work expectations;
- Include rigorous content and application of knowledge through higher-order skills;
- Build upon strengths and lessons of current state standards;
- Reflect expectations of top-performing countries so that all American students are prepared to succeed in our global



economy; and

- Are evidence- and/or research-based.
- Representative panels of college and university faculty members, convened by leading scholarly societies in partnership with the American Council on Education (ACE), helped review and shape the standards. Within the states, faculty members were typically called upon to review the standards as well.

Most states have begun carrying out the standards in at least some grades this academic year. The standards are grounded in the best-performing models, nationally and globally; frameworks developed for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP); the benchmarks of the American Diploma Project; academic research, curriculum surveys, and assessment data on college- and career-ready performance; and input from educators at all levels and on a variety of subjects.

The standards mark a significant departure from most previous standards in a number of ways. The authors of the standards adopted the motto “Fewer, clearer, higher” to guide their work. As a result, the standards avoid the common mistake of enumerating lists of discrete topics that students should know and instead concentrate on the skills that students must demonstrate to succeed

Across the country, educators are working together in ways they that define the core competencies

in college, such as a deep understanding of mathematical concepts, the ability to conduct research and write using sources, comfort with reading and writing persuasively about complex informational texts, and listening and persuasive speaking skills.

Because the standards are anchored in college- and career-ready expectations, they are designed to ensure that students graduate from high school ready to enter

and succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing college courses without the need for remediation, leading ultimately to increasing rates of college completion. For their part, states need careful and thoughtful plans for implementing the standards, including the development of integrated and aligned K–12 and postsecondary policies and practices. The postsecondary education community must play a role as well, by not only informing itself about the standards but also engaging as a full partner in their implementation through collaborative development of effective K–12 interventions and integration of the standards into postsecondary entry-level coursework. While public colleges and universities may be most fully engaged in carrying out the standards initiative because it is state-led, independent and for-profit institutions also have an important role to play and are encouraged to participate.

Role of Governing Boards

College and university governing boards can play an essential role both within their institutions and as opinion leaders in their states and communities. Since many public college and university board members are appointed by their state’s governors and legislatures, these trustees are uniquely positioned to communicate regularly with those policy makers to ensure their continuing support for the implementation of the standards and college-ready assessments being developed by two major multistate consortia: the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers

not take hold if it is seen as an add-on or an “other duty as assigned.”

The board and campus leaders are encouraged to demonstrate active support by articulating how improving college readiness will help the institution reach its existing strategic priorities of student retention and graduation. Board members at both public and independent colleges and universities can support efforts to build a culture of collaboration with K–12 and encourage the alignment of key policies to the new standards. Moreover, governing boards can encourage the implementation of the standards and the college-ready assessments by tracking progress on this agenda at their meetings.

Role of Presidents and Chief Academic Officers

College and university presidents and chief academic officers can support the adoption of the standards and acceptance and use of the college-ready assessments in their institutions by pursuing the following strategies:

- Encourage faculty to integrate the new standards when assessing and redesigning entry-level courses in mathematics and English-language arts;
- Encourage collaboration between the schools/colleges of education and the colleges/departments of mathematics and arts/sciences to provide pre-service and in-service instruction on the new standards;
- Support partnerships between institutions and local school districts to ensure effective implementation of the standards and assessments;

leaders, building awareness of the standards and college-ready assessments, soliciting feedback, and developing consensus so that these leaders have confidence in the assessments and will adopt these placement standards.

The successful achievement of these outcomes at the campus level will increase significantly with the endorsement and support of governing board members.

Role of College and University Faculty Members

College and university faculty members have a key role to play in the implementation of the standards and their related assessments. At most institutions, the faculty will help decide whether to recognize the PARCC and Smarter Balanced assessments as indications of students’ readiness for entry-level, credit-bearing courses. College and university faculty members were directly involved in producing the standards, and a 2011 national survey of faculty members, “Reaching the Goal: The Applicability and Importance of the Common Core State Standards to College and Career Readiness,” confirms that most find the standards a good reflection of the knowledge and skills students need to succeed in first-year courses.

To ensure that the high-school assessments also accurately reflect postsecondary expectations, faculty members and academic leaders will be called upon to provide formal input as the assessments are designed and developed. Faculty members will be asked to identify priority

never have before to implement the Common Core State Standards in mathematics and English-language arts students need to succeed in college and their careers.

(PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium. (See sidebar, page 20; each of the authors of this article is affiliated with one of those consortia.)

As many colleges and universities around the country institute plans to boost college completion, boards should ensure that improving college readiness through active participation in carrying out the standards is part of those plans. Collaboration with K–12 education will

- Communicate the importance of the new standards and how these standards will prepare students academically for placement into entry-level, credit-bearing courses without the need for remediation, thus increasing completion rates and shortening the time to degree; and
- Engage faculty and administrative leaders from the state’s public universities in collaboration with K–12

content and standards to be assessed, provide input on questions that will measure the new standards in English and mathematics performance tasks, and define performance levels that indicate college and career readiness. The two assessment consortia already are actively engaging college and university faculty in this work.

As high schools align their curricula to the standards, postsecondary institutions also will face questions about their own

New Common Assessments to Measure Progress toward College Readiness

Two multistate consortia, the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium, were awarded federal Race to the Top grants in September 2010. The 45 states that are committed to the Common Core State Standards, including the District of Columbia, have agreed to participate in at least one of the two consortia. Work is underway to design new assessment systems for the 2014–15 school year.

To establish a consistent standard for adults who have left school and seek an equivalency credential, the GED® tests are also being aligned to the standards along a similar timeframe.

Although each consortium takes a different approach to engaging postsecondary education, a goal common to both is that public colleges and universities will ultimately recognize an agreed-upon score on an end-of-year high-school assessment as an indication that a student is ready for entry-level, credit-bearing courses, and thereby exempt those students from remediation in mathematics and/or English. This approach is modeled on the Early Assessment Program in California, which exempts students

who meet a set score on that state's 11th-grade assessment from taking placement exams at the California State University and participating California community colleges.

Importantly, these assessment systems give an early warning to high-school students if they are not ready for credit-bearing college coursework in English and math, affording them an opportunity to correct deficiencies during their senior year, thereby decreasing the need for remediation. Estimates prepared in 2010 by the American College

“K–12 officials, state policymakers, and university leadership all need to be involved from the beginning to agree to the standards and make sure students know exactly what they need to be college-ready. It is only when all of these entities work together that a new generation of students will be fully prepared to succeed in college.”

—Charles B. Reed, chancellor of The California State University

Testing Program (ACT) in “A First Look at the Common Core and College Readiness” suggested that only one-third to one-half of 11th-grade students would meet the college readiness benchmark. Thus, some of the greatest benefits of the new assessments will accrue not to the students who are deemed college-ready, but rather to those students who are not yet ready and can access additional assistance during their senior year of high school. Here, too, post-secondary education faculty members can work closely with their K–12 colleagues to design interventions that help struggling students reach the

college-ready level while still in high school.

Placement is more complicated than just certifying that students are ready for a single course. Students who meet the standard in 11th grade may be required to take additional courses in 12th grade, for example, and could still need to take a college or university's exam to determine appropriate placement within that institution's array of credit-bearing courses.

Institutions may debate the feasibility and even the advisability of standardizing place-

and university faculty members, academic administrators, and registrars will need to be deeply involved in these discussions.

For more information on the standards and the assessment consortia:

Common Core State Standards: www.corestandards.org

Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC): www.parcconline.org

SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium: www.smarterbalanced.org

ment policies at the system or state level. However, given the importance of sending clear signals to schools, teachers, and students and the commitment many institutions have already made to support the use of college-ready assessments, colleges and universities should seriously consider creating consistent placement standards for similar entry-level courses, aligned with the Common Core State Standards and assessments. Doing so will provide a clear, consistent, and meaningful signal to high-school leaders, teachers, students, and parents about the expectations of higher education. College

Other Resources:

- ACT, “A First Look at the Common Core and College Readiness,” December 2010: www.act.org/commoncore
- Dr. David Conley, et al., “Reaching the Goal: The Applicability and Importance of the Common Core State Standards to College and Career Readiness.” Educational Policy Improvement Center (EPIC), Eugene Oregon: www.epiconline.org
- Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), “PISA 2009 Results: What Students Know and Can Do.” December 2010: www.oecd.org/edu/pisa/2009

courses. Will students who successfully complete a college-ready curriculum transition seamlessly into first-year college courses? Do those courses assume mathematics or English-language arts knowledge and skills that are not part of the standards? Do curricula for relevant remedial and adult-education courses align to the common core? The standards thus opens up two types of exciting opportunities for postsecondary faculty members: to work in collaboration with K–12 educators to create seamless transitions between sectors, and to reassess their own curricula for adult, developmental, and general education in light of these new common state benchmarks.

Teacher Preparation and In-Service Professional Development

As states move toward implementation of the standards, perhaps no issue looms larger for postsecondary education than teacher preparation and professional development. Strong college-ready standards and cutting-edge assessments are important, but the success of these reforms will ultimately reside in the classroom. Will current and new teachers be ready to teach to the new higher standards? What must colleges and universities do—both in their colleges of education and in their schools of arts and sciences—to prepare teachers to be effective?

In reaction to, or parallel with, the standards initiative, there has been a spate of recent national activity on teacher preparation and professional development. In October 2010, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) released a draft of new model teaching standards that are aligned with the Common Core State Standards to guide state policy in areas such as program approval and teacher certification and licensure. The American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education (AACTE) has called for the creation of teacher-performance assessments and professional-development programs linked to the Common Core State Standards. At the discipline level, the Conference Board on the Mathematical Sciences (CBMS) has released draft recommendations for the type and amount of mathematics prepara-



Will current and new teachers be ready to teach to the new higher standards?

tion that teacher-education programs must provide as schools begin to put in place the standards. Clearly, K–12 and postsecondary education will have to collaborate closely—with support from national organizations like these—in order to help current and future teachers succeed. And at institutions that have teacher-education programs, boards should ask the appropriate questions about how those programs are being redesigned.

A number of prominent national organizations and foundations have mounted efforts to support the implementation of standards in K–12 and postsecondary education. In December 2010, the CCSSO, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), and the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) joined together to form the College Readiness Partnership (CRP). This partnership focuses on issues that require the collaboration of K–12 and postsecondary education. One of the issues they will address collectively is the improvement of teacher preparation and

professional development in states that have adopted the standards. This partnership will publish promising pre-service educator preparation and in-service professional-development programs as well as other essentials for assisting teachers and leaders in the K–12 areas to implement the standards and new assessments.

Conclusion

The Common Core State Standards represent a significant change in the expectations that schools are placing on leaders, teachers, and students. K–12 educators have courageously accepted this challenge, but they cannot do it alone. They need the active participation of their postsecondary colleagues. Ensuring that students are academically prepared for college is the collective responsibility of K–12, state policymakers, and postsecondary leaders. Boards can play an important leadership role by encouraging full

participation in carrying out this crucial agenda. ■

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T'SHIP LINKS: Charles B. Reed, "Building the Educational Pipeline." November/December 2010. Arne Duncan, "Rethinking Higher Education: Beyond the Iron Triangle." September/October 2009.

OTHER RESOURCES: "AGB Statement on Board Responsibility for the Oversight of Educational Quality" (AGB, 2011). Susan Whealler Johnston, "How Boards Oversee Educational Quality" (AGB, 2010).

NOTE: Portions of this article are based in part on "The Common Core State Standards: An Action Agenda for Higher Education," January 2011, published by the American Council on Education, Achieve, and State Higher Education Executive Officers (available at www.acenet.edu/go/CommonCore). Used with permission of the American Council on Education.