Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium:

Building a Plan for Higher Education to Implement the Smarter Balanced Assessment System

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Introduction

The national movement to improve K-12 education through the implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) presents a tremendous opportunity for higher education to experience reduced remediation and increased degree completion. In order for the CCSS to realize their promise, however, higher education must be a full partner with K-12 in their implementation. This document provides guidance for state higher education leaders on one crucial aspect of implementation: the role that state systems of higher education must play to build toward recognition of the Smarter Balanced assessment as evidence that students are ready for entry-level, credit-bearing courses and should be exempted from remediation in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics[1]. Where broader issues of CCSS implementation intersect with this primary focus, they are addressed. This document does not provide guidance on other important aspects of higher education's role in CCSS implementation—most notably curriculum alignment and teacher preparation and professional development—that do not directly press on recognition of the Smarter Balanced assessment system. Plans are underway to provide such guidance in the future.

The timeline for creating and implementing the Smarter Balanced assessment system is aggressive. The federal grant that funds the Consortium's work requires that the assessment system be operational in 2014-15. To meet this timeline, the Consortium has created a detailed master work plan which features pilot testing in 2012-13, a large-scale field test in 2013-14 and the setting of performance standards in 2014. State education agencies and school districts are also moving quickly. Most states that have adopted the Common Core State Standards have already begun revising curricula and offering professional development to teachers; in some districts, conversion to use of CCSS already has occurred. Because of this schedule, it is important for state systems to begin work now on educating higher education faculty and administrators about CCSS and Smarter Balanced and their implications for higher education. This document provides guidance to help state higher education leaders plan that work.

The title of this guide should not be construed to suggest that there is a singular, consistent and linear path that higher education leaders can follow to help their states successfully implement the Common Core State Standards and the Smarter Balanced assessment system. Because the structure, governance, and politics of higher education differ considerably from state to state, the process required is expected to be variable and non-linear. Some steps may naturally precede others, but many others should occur concurrently. Many "steps" are not actually steps at all but rather ongoing processes. Higher education leaders should filter the suggestions in this document through their local knowledge about the processes, policies, and people that will factor into reaching the goal of providing students, parents, and schools with clear, consistent signals about the expectations that must be met for students to be ready for collegiate-level course work.[2]

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[1] Many steps also must be taken by the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium to achieve this goal (e.g. engaging higher education in the design of the assessments and setting of performance standards, developing policies to guide higher education's use of the assessment scores, ensuring prospective students understand the importance of these new assessments, etc.).

[2] Research on the needs of employers suggest that the ELA and mathematics skills required for the high-skill work place are not significantly different from those that are necessary for success in entry-level collegiate coursework. As a result, high school graduates who master the CCSS will be ready for an array of postsecondary options.

BUILDING A PLAN FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

The steps that higher education leaders must undertake can be organized into four categories:
- Organization
- Agenda-setting and Planning
- Communications and Engagement
- Implementation and Policy Change

Under each category, a series of suggestions or guiding questions are outlined. Smarter Balanced welcomes suggestions for improving this implementation template; please send your comments to SBAC@wested.org.

Summary of Steps to Higher Education Implementation of the Smarter Balanced Assessment System	
Organization	Integrate higher education into the state's existing CCSS Steering Committee
	Establish higher education CCSS workgroups with geographical representation from two- and four-year institutions
	Identify or hire project management staff
Agenda-Setting and Planning	Document context and history
	Establish higher education goals for CCSS implementation
	Create a set of operating principles
	Construct the critical paths to reaching the state's goals
	Create a definition of college readiness
	Draft a master plan
Communications and Engagement	Create core messages
	Establish a communications plan
	Identify and bring on board key influencers
	Establish regular Common Core/Smarter Balanced communications channels
	Consider statewide or regional convenings to share information and build support
	Get the state engaged in Smarter Balanced
Implementation and Policy Change	Implement the plan, monitor progress and hold individuals accountable
	Make course corrections as necessary
	Evaluate and revise

Organization

- Integrate higher education into the state's existing Common Core State Standards Steering Committee

  By now, most states have established some sort of team tasked with overseeing implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). That group may run out of a P-16 Council, the state K-12 education agency (SEA) or some other entity. Representatives from higher education should be part of that team to address the development and deployment of the Smarter Balanced assessments as well as the array of other important issues such as teacher preparation and professional development that require genuine P-16 collaboration. Higher education representatives on the state's Steering Committee should include the Smarter Balanced higher education lead, at least one chief academic officer, a dean of arts & sciences and/or chairs in English and Mathematics, a dean of a college of education, and a registrar.

- Establish higher education Common Core State Standards workgroups with geographical representation from two- and four-year institutions

  Above and beyond the statewide steering committee, higher education will need its own workgroups, which could be sub-committee(s) of the statewide committee, to address issues and responsibilities of particular concern to higher education. One approach is to establish two groups: one with responsibility for issues particular to teacher preparation and professional development and one that addresses curriculum alignment and integration of the Smarter Balanced assessments into higher education's college readiness requirements. If there are groups already in place that care about these issues and could be put to this purpose, those groups may be a good place to start. However, care should be taken to ensure broad participation from a diverse array of constituents.

  The composition of the Curriculum and Assessment workgroup will of course vary, but it should likely include:

  - The Smarter Balanced state higher education lead
  - The Smarter Balanced state K-12 lead and other SEA staff as needed
  - Academic leaders such as chief academic officers and deans
  - Leaders of key academic governance committees that oversee curriculum and placement policy
  - English and mathematics chairs and/or senior faculty as well as a faculty who teach entry-level courses in the sciences and social sciences
  - Registrars, since these individuals typically are responsible for administering campus placement policies

  All public institutions or (in larger states) systems should be represented in some way. Representatives of independent colleges and universities should also be included if they have an interest in participating.

- Identify or hire project management staff

  Major change initiatives such as this one require the dedicated attention of one or more key staff. If everyone working on the project is doing so as an add-on to existing responsibilities, it will be very difficult to sustain the necessary momentum. If possible, one or more individuals should be identified who can do the work necessary to keep planning and implementation moving forward.

Agenda-Setting and Planning

- Document context and history

  As a precursor to developing an implementation plan, someone with considerable experience in the state should be tasked with outlining the history of any reform efforts that would bear on CCSS implementation, including P-16 initiatives, attempts at vertical alignment of curricula, or changes to placement standards and policies. This background document should describe the outcomes of those initiatives, the key players in the state whose participation has been instrumental, and the major lessons that were learned. It should also describe the broader context in which state leaders will be attempting reform. What is the historical relationship between K-12 and higher education? Between two- and four-year institutions? Are there individuals whose support is crucial to the success of policy change efforts? Are there structures such as a P-16 council or a non-governmental group that can play a facilitating role? Those who ignore history are doomed to repeat it, so this historical/context analysis is an important early step, especially if there have been recent changes in leadership. Often, there will be someone in the state who can serve as an unofficial historian and pull this document together. A side benefit of tapping such an individual for an important early role is that he or she may end up being an informal champion of CCSS and Smarter Balanced.

- Establish higher education goals for CCSS implementation

  As in any large initiative, goal-setting is an important early step. In this case, the most important questions may revolve around how the state can take advantage of the national move to common standards and assessments to advance its own strategic priorities. Most notably, how can CCSS help the state meet its existing goals with regard to degree completion, productivity and economic competitiveness? What new opportunities do CCSS and Smarter Balanced present for P-16 collaboration and improved learning?

- Create a set of operating principles

  Workgroups may find it helpful to establish a set of operating principles to guide their work both with each other and with colleagues across the state. Examples of the types of principles that groups might adopt are:

  - Regular and open communication
  - Clear, concise achievable milestones
  - Open process for participation by all higher education sectors
  - Full engagement of higher education faculty and administrators
  - Representation from all regions within the state

- Involvement of representatives from underserved groups
- A student-centered focus on the impact of policies and practices
- Consideration for the needs of teachers and schools

- Construct the critical paths to reaching the state's goals

A critical path analysis works backward from a given goal or end-state, envisioning the critical steps and milestones that must be achieved along the path to that goal, their timelines, and dependencies. A critical path analysis can be conducted for each major goal related to CCSS implementation. For example, to conduct a critical path analysis for the goal of adopting the Smarter Balanced assessment as an indicator of college-readiness, states should ask themselves questions such as the following:

- Specifically, what needs to happen so that the 11th grade assessment can be used to indicate students are ready for entry-level, credit-bearing course work?
  - Does public higher education already have common placement standards? If so, what process is needed to align those standards to the Common Core and Smarter Balanced? If not, what process must be undertaken to broach this topic and move institutions toward appreciating the benefits of setting common expectations?
  - Which entities have decision-making authority over the use of Smarter Balanced as a readiness assessment? Can decisions be made at a state or system level, or must each institution act individually? Is legislative or regulatory action necessary?
  - What activities are needed to inform key decision-makers about CCSS and Smarter Balanced and build consensus around their use in higher education?
  - What types of policies might need to be created? For example, would higher education want to set expectations for coursework and achievement in the senior year for those students who are deemed college-ready at the end of 11th grade?
  - Are there policies that need to change at the state and/or institutional levels in order to recognize the assessment and share student data? If so, what is the process for making necessary policy changes?
  - What kinds of interventions might K-12 and higher education work on for students who aren't deemed college-ready? How will collaboration take place between K-12 and higher education?
  - What kind of research evidence is needed about the efficacy of current and proposed policies?
- Approximately how long will each of those steps take? Are there any important deadlines?
- Who should take ownership for each step?
- Who are the key actors that need to be engaged?
- What are the dependencies between and among the steps?

According to the Smarter Balanced master timeline, full-scale implementation of the assessment system will occur in 2014–15. Performance standards, including the college-ready standard for the 11th grade summative assessment, will be set in 2014 through a consultative process that will feature significant participation by higher education faculty. Ideally, higher education institutions will make the policy changes necessary to recognize 11th graders as college-ready who take the assessment in the spring of 2015. The nature of those policy changes, and the process necessary to

enact them, will of course vary from state to state. A key feature of the implementation plan must be an outline of the policy changes that are necessary, the key individuals and groups that must be engaged, and identification of individuals who will take responsibility for shepherding the necessary changes through to completion.

It may not be necessary to adhere strictly to any particular planning model, but creating a detailed written plan with assignments and timelines will be essential for most states. In the weeks and months ahead, Smarter Balanced staff (the director of higher education collaboration and regional senior consultants who will be coming onboard beginning in May) will be available to advise and assist states on creating such a plan.

- Create a definition of college readiness

    Another important step for many states will be coming up with an operational definition of college readiness that extends beyond English and mathematics and the performance standards for the Smarter Balanced assessment. This conversation should encompass K-12 and higher education stakeholders. Agreeing upon a definition can help states focus their resources on areas that they have deemed most crucial to student success. Dr. David Conley and colleagues at the University of Oregon's Educational Policy Improvement Center (EPIC) have conducted a great deal of research on college readiness; this work may provide useful background for state discussions (see https://www.epiconline.org/files/pdf/ProgressEdReform_032012.pdf.)

- Draft a master plan

    Once a state has established goals and operating principles, identified critical paths, set a definition of readiness, and developed a communication plan as described below they should put all of this information into a master planning document that all actors can reference and use to monitor their own progress and the progress of the entire initiative. Of course, state plans will take many different forms, but all states should have a plan that has all or most all of the elements identified in this document.

Communications and Engagement

- Create core messages

    Drawing on Smarter Balanced communications materials, tested messages about the Common Core State Standards, and the state's policy goals, what are the core messages that need to be communicated to leaders, faculty, and staff? If possible, every communication should in some way bolster those core messages. If CCSS and Smarter Balanced are presented as means to help reach existing goals, rather than as yet another new reform initiative, they are likely to be better received by faculty and administrators. Higher education leaders must have compelling answers to the questions "Why are we doing this?" and "How does this benefit us?"

- Establish a communications plan

  Organized, targeted, and sequential communication is essential to foster understanding and support for the CCSS and Smarter Balanced. A communications plan that identifies target audiences, plans the roll-out of key information and messages to those audiences, and structures appropriate communications venues and formats will help ensure success. Common Core and Smarter Balanced are both huge initiatives that represent tremendous change for education in the United States. Different audiences will need different levels of detail about various aspects of these initiatives. For example, many faculty will want to read the CCSS and review research about how they have been received by their peers around the country. Campus presidents and provosts will want to understand how these initiatives can improve the success of their institutions and what major policy changes will be required. If there is a higher education committee in the state legislature that is distinct from the committee on K-12 education, it may know very little about the CCSS and Smarter Balanced assessments and thus require its own communication channel. Virtually all audiences will need to establish some familiarity and comfort with the Common Core State Standards before they will be ready to digest information about the Smarter Balanced assessment system and become supporters of its full implementation.

- Identify and bring on board key influencers

  Many times, reform initiatives rise or fall based on the support (or resistance) of a few key individuals who wield substantial formal or informal power. These individuals may be influential legislators, senior faculty, or even journalists or business leaders. Identify those key individuals early, reach out to them about CCSS and Smarter Balanced, solicit their feedback and advice, and help them understand how these initiatives can advance their priorities. Many times, these individuals will become important champions. At the very least, the "I was never consulted" trap will be avoided.

- Establish regular Common Core/Smarter Balanced communications channels

  Once the core audiences are identified, create communication channels that target relevant information to related groups. For example, it may make sense to create a channel for faculty that is distinct from the channels for campus leaders or policy makers. National resources that are available to share with these groups include:

  - Overview of the Smarter Balanced system
  - Smarter Balanced Higher Education Factsheet
  - ACE paper on CCSS and Higher Education
  - Overview videos on the CCSS
  - Smarter Balanced FAQ for Higher Education
  - Smarter Balanced English and Mathematics Content Specifications
  - EPIC Study on Faculty Views of the CCSS

- Consider Statewide or Regional Convenings to Share Information and Build Support

  In addition to reading about the standards and assessments, faculty and administrators will want to discuss these new initiatives face-to-face. A statewide meeting or series of regional convenings can be a great way to share information and build support. Smarter Balanced is happy to assist by suggesting possible speakers, sharing resource materials, etc. The timing of such events is important. They should occur early enough that key constituents feel included in decision-making.

- Get the State Engaged in Smarter Balanced

  Another important way to build support for CCSS and Smarter Balanced is to foster engagement in the Consortium through participation on work groups or advisory committees and review of key documents. The more familiarity key faculty and other decision-makers have with the CCSS and Smarter Balanced, the more comfortable they are likely to become with the notion of a common standard for college readiness.

Implementation & Policy Change

- Implement the plan, monitor progress, and hold individuals accountable

  A primary factor in the success of any change initiative is the day-to-day work of implementing the plan, monitoring progress, and holding people accountable for following through on commitments. No amount of planning or communication can compensate for this type of attention and commitment.

- Make course corrections as necessary

  All plans of this nature are living documents. As circumstances change, it will be necessary to revisit the plan and make adjustments. This should be anticipated, and the Curriculum and Assessment Workgroup should convene regularly to monitor progress on the plan and make changes as circumstances warrant.

- Evaluate and revise

  A lot will be learned in the first few years of implementation as students around the country take the new assessments and enter higher education. Inevitably, states will want to make changes or enhancements. Smarter Balanced will establish an active national research agenda, but states and institutions will want to do their own studies. How well are high school interventions for off-track students working? What adjustments should be made to placement policies or first-year curricula? Should the program of developmental instruction be adjusted? States will want answers to these and other questions. The infrastructure created to shepherd the implementation of CCSS can help plan these studies and recommend policy and programmatic changes based on the results.