

Early Assessment: An Important Role for the University

By Charles B. Reed

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Many college-bound students face two major hurdles—and most only know about one of them. The first is the better-known hurdle of access, or getting in to college; the second is the issue of college readiness, or getting ready for college.

With the exception of a few highly selective institutions, most colleges and universities around the country face the challenge of students' skills not being up to par with what is expected of them at the university level. When students arrive without being able to do the work, they have to take some form of developmental or remedial education, which is costly for both the university and the students.

Yet surprisingly, higher education has been under-involved in working with K–12 schools to align standards and expectations. In fact, when the National Governors Association and Achieve invited college presidents and presidential associations to the 2005 National Education Summit on High Schools, the most common response they heard was: “What do high schools have to do with me?”

At the California State University (CSU), which is the largest university system in the country with more than 400,000 students, we have faced a major challenge with the large number of students who meet all of the CSU system qualifications but need remedial education when they arrive on our doorstep. Our board of trustees set a goal almost 10 years ago to reduce the need for remediation in English and math to 10 percent of incoming students by 2007. When I came to California shortly afterwards, I pledged that the California State University would do everything it could to smooth the pathway from California's K–12 schools to higher education.

We have launched a series of efforts to reach out to the K–12 schools and work more closely on integrating our standards and making our expectations clear. One of our most important efforts involves a collaborative effort with the CSU, the California State Board of Education, and the California Department of Education: the Early Assessment Program (EAP), an 11th-grade test that incorporates the CSU's placement standards into the California Standards Test.

The EAP is kind of like an early warning system. It lets students—and their parents and teachers—know in the 11th grade if they need to do additional work in their senior year to get up to speed on English and math. By keeping everyone informed, it helps us align college readiness expectations with K–12 standards and assessments, and it helps all of us provide a more cost-effective path to college by reducing students' need for remediation and improving the path to the baccalaureate degree. We offer many supplemental materials to reinforce the EAP, including online support for students and professional development to help teachers understand the expectations of college-level English and math.

Although the test is voluntary, last year about 120,000 students took the math test and about 186,000 took the English test. But we still need to do more to exercise the EAP's full potential. One key piece that we are still developing is informing our parents and communities about the EAP and about their students' performance. This year, a priority of our EAP work is to help districts ensure that parents receive EAP results.

We also are working to increase parent and community awareness by working directly with California communities. We have held college awareness events across the state; two recent “Super Sunday” events at African-American churches reached more than 30,000 people. Additionally, this fall we are distributing more than half a million “How to Get to College” posters to California's middle and high school students. The poster—offered in five languages—gives a grade-by-grade checklist for students to prepare for college.

What's in it for the university? For starters, there is clearly a benefit in the reduced need for remediation. Additionally, the partnerships created can lead to improved curriculum and instruction at

both the K–12 and college levels. Universities also will realize a secondary benefit of improvements in teacher preparation that come from working closely with public school partners. And most universities that lead or participate in these kinds of partnerships reap the public benefits of recognition from state and local governments.

As educators, both universities and K–12 schools share a common goal in producing educated and well-rounded citizens for the future. With more of these partnerships in place, we can move closer to the ideal of ensuring that all students have access to information about college, are prepared to get there, and are prepared to succeed once they enroll.

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