

## Five Action Steps to Supporting High School Assessments

### Step One:

#### ***Clearly define expectations for incoming students***

Surveys indicate that high school and postsecondary faculty disagree about the depth and breadth of state standards that constitute college readiness.

Postsecondary education faculty can break through this impasse and take a leadership role in defining college-ready standards so the fundamental content knowledge skills postsecondary faculty value are taught rigorously. This requires:

1. Delineating what students ought to know and be able to do in their high school courses in each subject area so that students have a solid foundation on which to begin the next course. However, only a minority of states—21 in language arts, 19 in mathematics, and 17 in science— have course-level standards in grades 9 through 12.
2. Describing these standards publicly to K-12 educators, students, and their parents.

### Step Two:

#### ***Scrutinize placement tests given to incoming students to determine eligibility for entry into credit-bearing courses***

Once postsecondary institutions have clearly defined their expectations, it is important that they examine their existing placement tests (and admissions tests if they are used to make placement decisions) to see whether they measure the content and skills needed to enter and complete credit-bearing courses. Why does your institution or campus use the particular assessment it does? Are the tests pegged to the level of preparation needed to complete credit-bearing courses?

Based on research conducted by Achieve, it is important that your campus or system examine attributes of reading, writing and mathematics assessment:

1. **Reading:** To what extent do the admissions and placement tests reflect the full range of diverse and challenging reading students are likely to do in college?
  - a. How well do reading passages balance between informational and literary texts?
  - b. How cognitively challenging are the reading questions?
2. **Writing:** Do the admissions and placement tests ask students to produce a writing sample?
  - a. Does the writing test require students establish a thesis and argue a position using evidence to support it and persuade the reader?

- b. To what extent do admissions and placement tests approximate the actual writing circumstances students will face in college?
- c. To what extent do the scoring rubrics focus on proper use of grammar and syntax and the ability to use language effectively and fluently to express ideas?

If the tests use indirect writing assessments:

- d. Do they assess vocabulary, appropriate and varied sentence structure, proper grammar, usage, punctuation, and capitalization and spelling through editing (preferred) or sentence completion?
  - e. How cognitively challenging are indirect writing questions?
3. **Mathematics:** To what extent do admissions and placement tests measure the algebraic concepts, geometry, measurement, data analysis, and statistics needed for success in credit-bearing courses?
- a. How cognitively challenging are the questions?

### Step Three:

***Collaborate with K-12 on the development of high school tests that fully reflect the breadth and rigor of the needed for success in postsecondary education.***

College faculty (in core disciplines as well as assessment experts) can help assessment leaders in K-12 develop end-of-course assessments that:

- Measure and score the depth of fundamental content knowledge skills in core college preparatory courses;
- Reflect the circumstances students will face in credit-bearing college courses;
- Include cognitively challenging questions that permit colleges to use the results for placement decisions.

### Step Four:

***Allow students the opportunity to “test out” of placement exams***

College faculty can work with K-12 assessment leaders to develop a scoring rubric for high school assessments that provides information about college readiness.

1. College-ready (exempt from college-sponsored placement exams); college ready (conditionally exempt, assuming successful completion of courses in the senior year); not college-ready (not exempt; student needs to master additional content knowledge skills to demonstrate readiness); or incomplete (not exempt; student must take the college-sponsored placement exams).
2. Work with faculty across the system or state to align their cut scores and establish a single standard for placement that applies no matter where a student decides to go to college.
3. Develop or redesign, with high school faculty, senior year courses in core subjects that will address consistent gaps in student readiness, as demonstrated by high school assessment results.



**Step Five:**

***Include results on high school assessments as criteria for campus-based and statewide financial aid***

Merit criteria for financial aid can reinforce the value of mastering fundamental content knowledge skills. Many colleges and states use admissions scores or grades to determine eligibility for some financial aid. Financial aid officers at both levels can add or substitute “college ready” scores on high school assessments to this criteria.

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**POSTSECONDARY  
CONNECTION**

Making the link between high school preparation and college success