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Common Core curriculum for K-12 could have far-reaching effects on higher education

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For traditional college freshmen, the gap between high school and college is easy to step across -- a few months, at the most, between graduating from one institution and enrolling at another. For those institutions, though, the distance between K-12 and higher education is often more like an unbridgeable chasm.

That's not for lack of trying. In recent years, states have created "K-16" or "P-20" councils, groups of high-level officials from both systems aiming to align K-12 education with postsecondary goals. Often, though, the councils' work hasn't taken off, or has devolved through finger-pointing to a stalemate and status quo.

As elementary and secondary schools in 45 states and the District of Columbia [1] work to implement new, more rigorous and increasingly controversial standards for math and language arts, though, that stalemate might be easing. The new standards, known the Common Core State Standards Initiative, for the first time make college and career readiness for every high school graduate an explicit, nearly nationwide goal. The first set of assessments is fast approaching, in the 2014-15 academic year.

Still, the new standards remain largely unknown among college and university faculty members and all but a few top administrators on college campuses. That's despite the fact the state-led initiative isn't only intended to transform elementary and secondary education. If the Common Core is implemented as advocates intend, its effects would significantly alter how many things work in higher education too.

Those adjustments, if the Common Core vision is realized, could transform dual enrollment programs, placement tests, and remediation. They could force colleges within state systems, and even across states, to agree on what it means to be "college ready," and to work alongside K-12 to help students who are unprepared for college before they graduate from high school. In the long run, it could force changes in credit-bearing courses too, to better align with what students are supposed to have mastered by high school graduation. While the effects will be most obvious at public institutions of higher education, private colleges, particularly those with broad access missions, will feel the effects as well.

Still, although a few states have seized the standards to develop "P-20" systems -- stretching from pre-kindergarten through graduate school -- progress has been slow in many others. In 2010, as the standards were being developed, policy makers touted the effect [2] they could have in bringing together K-12 and higher education. And they pointed out that the ultimate success of the standards, particularly beyond K-12, will depend on whether colleges are willing to change placement and remediation criteria and work together to determine what "readiness" really means.

In some cases, that's coming to pass. Three years later, proponents for the standards are arguing that they have already changed the way K-12 and postsecondary education interact -- at least by putting the leaders of each system in the same room together and forcing states to collaborate.

But plenty of work remains to be done, on campus and in the K-12 system, before assessments begin in about two years.

"Most of our colleges and universities have heard about the Common Core," says John Hammang, associate vice president for academic leadership and change at the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, which is working with colleges in 13 states on Common Core implementation. "Most of them have probably not thought about what the implications are for their institutions and what kinds of adjustments they need to make."

The Common Core: A Primer

Higher education attainment is an ultimate goal of the Common Core standards, which aim to make sure students are "college and career-ready" by the end of high school. The standards establish benchmarks for what students should have learned in math and language arts (and, in a separate effort from 36 states, science) by the 11th grade in order to be ready for college. States are working together to set the standards and define what students should have learned. When the Common Core-aligned assessments go into effect, the progress of students in Massachusetts and students in Mississippi will be measured with a similar yardstick.

The Common Core initiative was announced in 2009, at the same time as the other big education goal for the Obama administration and nonprofit foundations: boosting the nation's college graduation rates. While the Common Core isn't explicitly linked to that goal, which relies heavily on getting adults with some college across the finish line to a credential, the two are nonetheless intertwined.

The overall goal of the Common Core is to get students "college- and career-ready." K-12 and postsecondary systems will define exactly what that means in each state, but broadly, it implies that students should be prepared to enter credit-bearing -- not remedial -- courses after high school graduation, says Travis Reindl, education program director for the National Governors' Association, which played a key role in developing the standards. (Next week, Reindl joins the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation as a senior program officer focused on postsecondary issues.)

Proponents believe better preparation in K-12 will cut remediation rates, increase college retention rates, and shorten the path to a college degree for high school graduates. And several of the same groups working on the graduation goal also have invested in the Common Core, including the Gates Foundation and the Lumina Foundation.

Two state groups -- the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers -- worked with Achieve, a nonprofit education reform group, to develop the standards.

While the Education Department wasn't involved in writing the standards -- advocates take great pains to note it's a state-driven (not federal) effort, hoping to avoid conservative alarm bells about a nationalized curriculum -- it has thrown as much weight as it can behind a push to get states to join the Common Core. Adopting "college and career-ready" standards was a requirement for applying for a waiver from No Child Left Behind and for applications to Race to the Top, the department's effort to use competitive grants to push changes in state education policy. And Education Department grants in the stimulus bill of 2009 have helped fund the two consortiums of states developing Common Core assessments.

As a result, 45 states and the District of Columbia have adopted the Common Core standards. (Two big states -- Virginia and Texas -- are among the holdouts. And the effort has hit some speed bumps recently in Indiana, Michigan, Ohio and Florida, where legislators have said they are concerned that the new standards will wrest control of schools away from local districts.)

Early results on whether the tests will show students to be "college ready" are unlikely to be promising. ACT, Inc., helped develop the Common Core standards and is positioning itself to be involved in assessing whether students meet them. An analysis [3] of statewide ACT testing in 2010 found that only 31 percent of 11th-grade students could be considered “college- and career-ready” under the Common Core when evaluated on reading a complex text. Results were only slightly better on the standards in math.

College faculty tend to agree. ACT's most recent survey [4], released last week, looked at the gap between high school and college expectations for students. It found that only 26 percent of college faculty thought that students entered their classrooms prepared for college-level work. High school teachers gave themselves much higher marks. Nearly all -- 89 percent -- said they had prepared their students well for college.

"There's been this huge disconnect," says Allison Jones, vice president for postsecondary collaboration at the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, one of two consortiums of states developing assessments based on the Common Core standards.

PARCC brought high school and college faculty together in 2011, early in the process of developing assessments, says Jones, a former assistant vice chancellor with the California State University system. Leaders of the effort learned high school teachers think students need to know "everything" to go to college, while college faculty focused on a few key, broad concepts. "It's mind-boggling to most people," he says. "Almost without exception, every faculty member said, 'This is the first time we've had a chance to sit down together and talk.' "

The Common Core in College

So far, many state-level attempts to forge connections between elementary, secondary and postsecondary education to implement the Common Core standards have been at the highest altitudes -- between the heads of state systems, superintendents and sometimes college presidents and provosts. But aside from those top-level administrators, observers and groups working with the Common Core standards say even rudimentary knowledge among those in higher education can be spotty.

The exception has been schools of education, which will be the first to feel the impact of Common Core. For most faculty members, the effects of the new standards won’t be fully evident until students taught with Common Core-based curriculums in elementary and middle school arrive in a decade. Colleges of education, though, say they know they’re preparing teachers right now who will teach to the new standards almost immediately.

Some faculty members with many students of education in their classes are already changing their curriculums to reflect the Common Core. The new standards emphasize reading nonfiction alongside fiction, even in the early grades of elementary school. They also suggest specific works of literature that should be taught at various grade levels.

As a result, Jan Susina, a professor of English at Illinois State University who focuses on children’s literature, is considering adding *Fahrenheit 451* -- recommended for high school students under the Common Core -- to his syllabus next year. He’s also incorporating more nonfiction aimed at children to teach his undergraduates, most of whom are aspiring teachers.

“It’s easy for someone who teaches in a literature department or an English department to think, ‘Informational texts are not what I do,’ ” says Susina, who has proposed a session on the Common Core for the 2014 meeting of the Modern Language Association. “Clearly with this new educational reform, they’re going to need to be a lot more conscious about introducing nonfiction into their classes.”

But colleges don’t always realize that the Common Core could have implications beyond teacher education. That’s in part because faculty involvement in determining the standards and approving the assessments has varied. Some states have included hundreds of faculty members in defining what it means to be “college ready” and in evaluating the assessments. Still, many faculty, including Susina, see the standards as a project of the chief state school officers, governors and foundations, all groups without many faculty or elementary and secondary teachers among their membership.

The Modern Language Association reviewed the standards after they were developed, part of a review led by the American Council on Education. The association has been vocal about its concerns, most prominently the shift from emphasizing fiction to including nonfiction. Those protests have faded somewhat as the focus has shifted from what the standards should be to how they will be assessed, but many in the MLA remain skeptical. The association should continue to fight for "complex literary texts," says Michael Holquist, professor emeritus of comparative literature at Yale and a past president of the MLA. But "the train has left the station," he says. "The better part of wisdom now is to accommodate as best we can what’s going to be implemented."

Despite the MLA's focus on the issue over the past several years, Holquist says, “for the great majority of people in the professoriate, there’s an appalling ignorance about what’s going on.”

Beyond teacher education, the first effects of Common Core will be on how colleges place students in remedial education. Right now, institutions rely on widespread, mass-marketed tests -- largely Compass, from ACT, and Accuplacer, from the College Board -- to decide whether students need remedial courses. The idea is that statewide exams based on the Common Core will now play a role in

determining whether newly graduated high school seniors are ready for credit-bearing work. (Returning students would still use the existing tests.)

Students will take the final Common Core test of secondary school in 11th grade, not 12th. And so Common Core proponents see the standards as having an additional benefit: a cure for senioritis. Students already considered college-ready can be urged into Advanced Placement courses or dual enrollment programs with the local community college so they can get started on college-level work. Those who test as likely to be ready after their last year of high school will have an impetus to get up to speed during senior year to go directly into credit-bearing courses. For students who are further behind, college professors and high school teachers will work together to make senior year a bridge between high school and college, incorporating the curriculum for developmental courses at the college level.

This kind of cooperation between between community colleges and K-12 has been percolating for years. California's Early Assessment Program [5], a test developed by the California State University System to tell high school juniors whether they're ready for college-level work, is often cited as an example. And local efforts [6] to bring both remedial and college-level work into the high school classroom have reduced remediation rates, including projects in Long Beach, Calif., and McAllen, Tex.

But a broad agreement to determine readiness for college coursework based on a state standardized test puts more trust in state standards than colleges traditionally have shown.

One of the biggest hurdles is setting the "cut score" -- how well a student must do on the state assessments to be considered ready for college and careers. States committed to using the assessment from the two consortia of states that are developing them have agreed to set a common cutoff, meaning that students from, for example, Ohio and Maryland must perform at the same level to be considered prepared for college.

That's a big change for elementary and secondary education, where standards have long applied only within state borders. But it's also a significant shift for colleges. Setting one, bright line that students must clear in order to avoid remediation means that every public institution, no matter its selectivity, needs to accept a common definition of what it means to be ready for college-level work.

"It's an enormous change for higher ed," says Jacqueline King, director of higher education collaboration for Smarter Balanced, the other consortium of 24 states working on Common Core-based assessments, and formerly the director of the Center for Policy Analysis at the American Council on Education. "In lots of states, placement standards vary from campus to campus -- even within a state community college system. Now they're not just getting together and agreeing on standards within a state system, but across different types of institutions and across states."

The groups developing the assessments see this as a boon for students. "Right now, kids don't know what they need in order to college," says Jones, of PARCC. Jones recently looked through scholarship applications for a foundation in California and found that students with high class ranks and "better than an A" average had shockingly low scores on the SAT's verbal portion. "The students think that they're college-ready," Jones says. "There's no common expectation and there's no rigorous standard that says these are the areas you really need to understand."

More than 800 colleges and universities, most of them public institutions, have already agreed to use the results of assessments for placement purposes. (Getting state colleges on board with college- and career-ready standards was a requirement for states seeking waivers for No Child Left Behind.)

"The practical result is going to be something like this," says Hammang, of AASCU. "If you've taken the assessment and you are deemed college-ready in math or English, you don't get put into a developmental class. You get put in a credit-bearing class and go from there."

Colleges have agreed only to make the assessments one factor that they consider, and Smarter Balanced argues that institutions should take high school grades and other factors into account. "We know this is a high-stakes thing for kids in the 11th grade," King says. "It's not appropriate to make high-stakes decisions based exclusively on an assessment."

But that's what many colleges do now through Compass and Accuplacer. And there will be "tremendous political pressure" within states for colleges to rely on the new Common Core assessments instead when possible, Hammang says.

Whether the results match up -- whether students who score as "college-ready" on assessments are considered to be well-prepared once they actually enter college -- will be a stress test for the effectiveness of the Common Core. If colleges have reasons to doubt that standards are truly at college level, the trust between K-12 and higher education on which the entire initiative rests could easily erode.

"We've gone to all this trouble and expense," Hammang says. "They should mean something when a student shows up at your door."

The Kentucky Experiment

If you're wondering what all this might look like in practice, look to Kentucky. The state is a few years ahead of the rest of the country, and has become something of a bellwether for Common Core observers.

In 2009, the Kentucky legislature unanimously passed Senate Bill 1, an education reform measure that's grown to near-mythic status among Common Core advocates. The bill's goal was to cut the need for remediation in half by the 2014-15 academic year. It required the state to adopt new standards based on national and international benchmarks. And the measure called for collaboration between elementary, secondary and postsecondary education to develop the standards. The new assessments would take effect in 2012.

The legislation also did something rare in 2009, when state legislatures were slashing higher education budgets: it allocated $6 million to fund collaboration between postsecondary and K-12 education.

A year later, in 2010, Kentucky was the first state to adopt the Common Core. And with the state's 2012 deadline for implementing assessments, it's continued to be a few years ahead, and has served as a test case for the policy. Common Core proponents cite it as a glowing example.

The state had a few advantages going in besides the running start -- particularly that, beginning in 2006, Kentucky required all students to take the ACT in the 11th grade. The results were used to determine placement in college courses.

After the law was passed, Kentucky began working to better align K-12 and higher education curriculums. Senior year became a year for "transitional courses" -- courses with a curriculum based on college remediation, developed through a partnership between college and high school faculty.

At Eastern Kentucky University, faculty members taught professional development courses for K-12 teachers to push the remedial curriculums for language arts and math into the 12th grade. About half of the university's freshman class used to need remedial coursework, says Doug Whitlock, the university's president. Since 2009, the percentage of students who need remediation in math has dropped by 38 percent. In language arts, it has been cut in half.

Across the state, in the first year Common Core assessments were used, proficiency scores for students in elementary and middle school tumbled because the new standards are more rigorous than the old.

But the percentage of graduating students who tested as college and career-ready increased 9 percentage points, from 38 percent to 47 percent. About 3 percentage points could be attributed to the partnerships between K-12 and postsecondary education, and the rest to other factors, says Robert King, president of the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education.

"I've spent my entire life in education in this state," Whitlock says. "Right now, I think there's an unprecedented level of collaboration between" K-12 and postsecondary education.

That cooperation -- and dropping accusations of blame for, say, why half of Kentucky's high school graduates are still unprepared for college -- was key, King says. "It's got to be real," he says. "It's not just showing up for a press event and making nice to each other. You really have to be committed to work together and to jointly share in the responsibility."

Curriculum and Beyond

Common Core proponents envision effects ranging beyond placement tests and remedial education. Whether those come to pass, though, is more uncertain.

The new state standards still face plenty of hurdles between now and 2014, when Common Core-based assessments will begin. Much hinges on cooperation among states: an agreement on a common, minimum cutoff score for college readiness, and the underlying question of whether the two consortiums developing college assessments can be maintained. (Other test providers are interested in Common Core assessments, particularly ACT, whose officials pointed out that they have experience in determining college readiness, played a big role in creating the standards, and aren't going away anytime soon. There is also much speculation that the College Board will at some point jump into the fray, given the prominent role that its new president, David Coleman, played in crafting the Common Core. [7])

But the biggest question is the one underlying any proposed education reform: Will the Common Core succeed at producing high school graduates who actually are better prepared for college and careers?

Even if the answer turns out to be "no," the ramifications for higher education could be long-lasting. No Child Left Behind, the last attempt to overhaul K-12 education, is hardly seen as an unqualified success. But the law's defining legacy [8] is its focus on student subgroups -- requiring schools to be accountable for the progress of minority and disabled students and quantifying achievement gaps -- even if it didn't fix the problems.

In the same way, the Common Core -- even if it doesn't help boost college preparedness and eventually graduation rates -- has brought higher education and K-12 together and could force changes to how the two systems interact in the long term. But if the Common Core does succeed at better preparing students for college, it could have ramifications beyond remediation.

A real P-20 system, one covering preschool through graduate school, would have curriculums that line up. And if the Common Core prepares students better, or even differently, 100-level courses in math, English and language arts should be changed to pick up where high school left off, proponents say.

The groundwork is already being laid. PARCC is conducting research in two areas as the standards roll out: a "validity study," meant to determine whether the Common Core standards of readiness line up with performance in first-year courses in college; and an "alignment study," which looks at whether the content of college courses lines up with their high school counterparts. A handful of states have already agreed to do so, and at least half plan to.

But Common Core proponents say that changes in college curriculum -- what it means that students are studying more nonfiction in elementary and secondary school, or that integrated problem solving is being introduced before college-level statistics -- are a long-term goal. That's a tall order for many states, most of which aren't as far along as Kentucky on getting K-12 and higher education at the same table. In those states, just getting everyone in the same room can be counted as a victory.

"We're still in some places overcoming the hurdle of higher education saying, 'Well, these are K-12 standards. Why should I care?' " Reindl says. But, he said, "When you start just making lists of things that might potentially have to change, you very quickly see exactly how far into postsecondary education the standards reach."