



Frequently Asked Questions Smarter Balanced and Higher Education

About the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium

1. What is the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium?

The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (Smarter Balanced) is a state-led consortium working to develop next-generation assessments that accurately measure student progress toward college and career readiness. Smarter Balanced is one of two multistate consortia awarded funding from the U.S. Department of Education in 2010 to develop an assessment system aligned to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) by the 2014-15 school year. The work of Smarter Balanced is guided by the belief that a high-quality assessment system can provide information and tools for teachers and schools to improve instruction and help students succeed – regardless of disability, language or subgroup. Smarter Balanced involves experienced educators, researchers, state and local policymakers and community groups working together in a transparent and consensus-driven process. A list of current state members and the Smarter Balanced leadership can be found at www.SmarterBalanced.org.

2. What kinds of tests is Smarter Balanced developing?

Smarter Balanced is developing a system of valid, reliable and fair next-generation assessments aligned to the CCSS in English language arts/literacy (ELA/literacy) and mathematics for grades 3-8 and 11. The system—which includes both summative assessments for accountability purposes and optional interim assessments for instructional use—will use computer adaptive testing (CAT) technologies to the greatest extent possible to provide meaningful feedback and actionable data that teachers and other educators can use to help students succeed. A digital library of formative assessment practices and strategies will provide materials to help teachers address learning challenges and differentiate instruction.

Smarter Balanced assessments will go beyond multiple-choice questions to include extended response and technology enhanced items, as well as performance tasks that allow students to demonstrate critical-thinking and problem-solving skills. Performance tasks challenge students to apply their knowledge and skills to respond to complex, real-world problems. They can best be described as collections of questions and activities that are coherently connected to a single theme or scenario. These activities are meant to measure capacities such as depth of understanding, writing and research skills and complex analysis, which cannot be adequately assessed with traditional assessment questions. The performance tasks will be taken on a computer (but will not be computer adaptive) and will take one to two class periods to complete.

Smarter Balanced capitalizes on the precision and efficiency of CAT. This approach represents a significant improvement over traditional paper-and-pencil assessments used in many states today, providing more accurate scores for all students across the full range of the achievement continuum.

Alignment of CCSS and Smarter Balanced Assessment System to Higher Education Expectations

3. How do the CCSS define college and career readiness? Were college and university faculty involved in establishing this definition?

The writers of the CCSS, who included college and university faculty, began by defining the knowledge and skills in mathematics and ELA/literacy that students need to be ready to succeed in entry-level credit-bearing coursework and the high-skill workforce. To do this, the standards writers consulted existing college readiness benchmarks, research on student academic preparation, and surveys of business leaders, as well as content standards for top-performing states and countries. The standards-writers sought to create standards that are:

- Aligned with college and work expectations;
- Include rigorous content *and* application of knowledge through high-order skills;
- Build upon strengths and lessons of current state standards;
- Informed by top-performing countries, so that all students are prepared to succeed in our global economy and society; and,
- Evidence and/or research-based.¹

The College and Career-ready Standards were vetted by faculty around the country, including panels convened by the American Council on Education in collaboration with leading scholarly societies. Once the College- and Career-ready Standards were agreed upon, standards writers then created the grade level standards, “back-mapping” them to the college- and career-ready benchmarks. A recent survey of 1,800 faculty in an array of disciplines at a diverse set of institutions found substantial agreement that the CCSS define the knowledge and skills that students need to be ready for entry-level course work.²

4. The Common Core defines standards for college and career readiness; are college-readiness and career-readiness considered the same?

A substantial body of research demonstrates that the same sets of core knowledge and skills in ELA/literacy and mathematics are necessary for success in both entry-level credit-bearing courses and apprenticeship programs for high-performance careers. Based on this research, the standards writers did not distinguish between knowledge and skills that are necessary for success in college and careers.

5. How is Smarter Balanced defining college and career readiness?

Smarter Balanced seeks to align its assessments as closely as possible to the CCSS. Through its member states, and in consultation with the lead standards writers and other national education experts, Smarter Balanced is translating the CCSS into assessment targets, test blueprints and, ultimately, assessment items and performance tasks. The Consortium also must establish performance benchmarks that define the level of content and skill mastery that marks students

¹ Introduction, Common Core State Standards. Available at www.corestandards.org.

² David T. Conley and colleagues. *Reaching the Goal: The Applicability and Importance of the Common Core State Standards to College and Career Readiness*. Educational Policy Improvement Center. 2011. Available at <http://www.smarterbalanced.org/pub-n-res/reaching-the-goal/>.

as college- and career-ready. The consortium has begun the process of translating the standards into assessments, releasing content specifications in ELA/literacy and mathematics and approving the core “claims” about student knowledge and skills that the assessments will seek to measure.³ Item specifications also have been developed and released for comment. Setting performance standards will not occur until 2014 after student data have been collected through pilot and field testing.⁴

6. How will the Smarter Balanced assessments differ from the Common Core State Standards?

To the extent possible, the Smarter Balanced Assessment system will measure the full depth and breadth of the knowledge and skills specified in the CCSS. However, at least initially, practical considerations may preclude testing some of the content areas in the summative assessment. Most notably, it may not be possible to include an assessment of speaking in the summative assessment until advances in technology make it more practical to capture and score student speech in a large-scale assessment.

Providing Information to Support Admission and Placement Decisions

7. Is the Smarter Balanced summative assessment designed for use in college admissions?

No. The Smarter Balanced assessments are not designed to serve the function of admission examinations. Use of Smarter Balanced assessment scores in admission decisions is ultimately a policy decision for higher education systems and institutions, but Smarter Balanced is not designing its assessments for this purpose.

8. How will scores on the Smarter Balanced assessment support differentiating student performance for the purpose of placement?

A primary feature of the Smarter Balanced system is the commitment by higher education institutions to recognize an agreed-upon uniform performance level on the 11th grade summative assessment as evidence that students are ready for entry-level, credit-bearing courses in English and mathematics that satisfy general education requirements, and should be exempted from remedial or developmental coursework. Student course-taking and performance during the senior year may also factor in the college readiness decision. If students score at the college-ready level and wish to take more advanced courses, additional information would be needed to make specific course placement decisions. Likewise, if students score below the college-ready level, a placement test or diagnostic assessment may be needed to determine their developmental needs.

³ The English Language Arts claims have been approved. Mathematics claims are scheduled for a vote of the Consortium governing states in March 2012.

⁴ See <http://www.smarterbalanced.org/smarter-balanced-assessments/> for access to both the content and item specification documents.

9. To what extent will the Smarter Balanced assessments provide diagnostic information about specific content to support targeted interventions during the senior year of high school?

The Smarter Balanced interim assessment is expected to allow teachers to test student understanding of related clusters of standards and will support targeted instructional intervention.

Setting College and Career Readiness Performance Benchmarks

10. How will the performance standard be set for defining college and career readiness? What evidence will be used? Who will be able to weigh in on these decisions?

Because standard-setting will not occur until 2014, all the details of the process have not yet been determined. However, Smarter Balanced will encourage college and university faculty to play a very active role in this process, with higher education representatives playing a primary role in establishing college- and career-ready standards for the 11th grade assessment. In addition to expert judgment from K-12 teachers and higher education faculty, Smarter Balanced will draw upon multiple sources of empirical data to guide the setting of performance standards, including: international and national benchmarks such as PISA, TIMSS, NAEP, SAT and ACT; and information about student performance in high school and subsequent postsecondary success from state-level longitudinal data systems.

11. How will Smarter Balanced validate its college- and career-readiness claims?

A substantial research program has been designed and is being refined to validate and make adjustments to the college- and career-ready standard after full-scale administration begins in 2014-15. Because of the rigorous standard-setting process planned (see question 10), it is anticipated that the initial college- and career-ready benchmark will be predictive of student performance in the first year of college. Nonetheless, it will be important to validate the standard, and make any necessary adjustments, once postsecondary performance data are available for students who have taken the Smarter Balanced assessments. If possible, the standard-setting process may also incorporate preliminary findings from member states that make college coursework available to high school students or that administer the assessment to a sample of first-year college students. The details for most of these research efforts, however, have not yet been fully determined.

Using and Interpreting Smarter Balanced Assessment Scores

12. Students do not always enter college immediately after completing high school. Will student scores on Smarter Balanced assessments expire after some period of time?

Smarter Balanced will be consulting higher education representatives from its member states as well as the policies of other leading test providers to formulate guidance on this topic for colleges and universities.

13. Will there be a way for colleges to compare scores on the Smarter Balanced and PARCC assessments?



Yes. A task force has been formed by the two consortia to address this issue.

14. Will Smarter Balanced provide a means to compare student scores on its summative 11th grade assessment with scores on common placement examinations?

Studies are being planned to provide information comparing scores on the Smarter Balanced 11th grade assessment to the most commonly used placement examinations.

15. Will Smarter Balanced issue official guidance on the use of 11th grade summative scores by higher education? In particular, what additional information should colleges and universities require to account for changes that occur during the 12th grade?

Smarter Balanced understands that the timing of the assessment at the end of the 11th grade is a concern for some higher education institutions and systems. Based on the advice of the consortium's higher education representatives and research on predictors of student performance in higher education, Smarter Balanced may suggest additional data on 12th grade performance that colleges and universities might use to augment the 11th grade score.