College Content-Readiness Policy

Approved by Governing States
April 23, 2013

Note: This document is excerpted from the introduction to the Smarter Balanced draft Initial Achievement Level Descriptors (ALDs) for both ELA/literacy and mathematics. For the full ALD documents, download the ELA/Literacy document or the mathematics document.

Background

Representatives of higher education have been working closely with K–12 colleagues on the development of the Smarter Balanced assessments. This partnership is important because a primary goal of Smarter Balanced is that colleges and universities use student performance on the Grade 11 summative assessments in ELA and mathematics as evidence of readiness for entry-level, transferable, credit-bearing college courses. Connecting student performance to a tangible postsecondary outcome will send a clear signal to students, parents, and schools that the knowledge and skills delineated in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) matter, providing individual students with a powerful incentive to do their best work on the assessments and demonstrating the clear link between students' K–12 experience and the demands of higher education.

The CCSS enable the development of policies to more clearly connect K–12 and higher education. The standards were developed by both higher education faculty and K–12 content experts to clearly articulate the knowledge and skills necessary for college readiness in English language arts and mathematics. The Smarter Balanced draft Initial Achievement Level Descriptors and College Content-readiness Policy takes that process a step further by defining the performance standards that students must meet in order to be exempt from developmental coursework (not only what students must learn but to what degree they must master the specified knowledge and skills).[1]

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In order to guide colleges, universities, and schools in interpreting student performance, an operational definition of "college content-readiness" and accompanying policy framework were developed by state Higher-Education and K–12 Leads, as well as the faculty and teachers representing their states at the ALD-writing workshop (see Tables 2 and 3). Together, the operational definition and policy framework describe how colleges, universities, and schools should interpret student performance. The definition of college content-readiness, policy framework and related stipulations were developed over the course of several meetings with the state K–12 and Higher Education Leads, as well as discussion with participants at the ALD-writing workshop. After each meeting, the draft was further refined. Like the ALDs, the definition and policy framework represent initial work that will be refined once student performance data are collected and analyzed.

[1] The term developmental coursework refers to non-credit courses designed to instruct students on material that is pre-requisite to entry-level, credit-bearing courses.

College Readiness and College Content-Readiness.

Smarter Balanced recognizes that college readiness encompasses a wide array of knowledge, skills, and dispositions, only some of which will be measured by the Smarter Balanced assessments. As a result, Smarter Balanced narrowed the focus of its "college readiness" definition to "content-readiness" in the core areas of ELA/literacy and mathematics.

Intended Audience. This document is not designed as a communications vehicle for students and parents. Smarter Balanced will continue outreach to higher education (including officials who specialize in student/parent communications such as admission officers and academic advisors) as Reporting ALDs are developed and student score reports are designed. Further, while there will be elements of student/parent communications that are common across the Consortium, the flexibility built into the College Content-readiness Policy will require that each state customize communications based on the policy choices made.

College Content-Readiness Definition

English Language Arts/Literacy[2]	Students who perform at the College Content-Ready level in English language arts/literacy demonstrate reading, writing, listening, and research skills necessary for introductory courses in a variety of disciplines. They also demonstrate subject-area knowledge and skills associated with readiness for entry-level, transferable, credit-bearing English and composition courses.
Mathematics	Students who perform at the College Content-Ready level in mathematics demonstrate foundational mathematical knowledge and quantitative reasoning skills necessary for introductory courses in a variety of disciplines. They also demonstrate subject-area knowledge and skills associated with readiness for entry-level, transferable, credit-bearing mathematics and statistics courses. .

[2] Speaking is an element of the CCSS in English language arts/literacy, but practical and technological constraints do not allow for the assessment of speaking skills on the Smarter Balanced summative assessment. Therefore, at this time the College Content-readiness Policy does not include speaking.

Policy Framework for Grade 11 Achievement Levels

Level	Policy ALD	Description	Implications for Grade 12	Implications for High School Graduates who Immediately Enter Higher Education
4	Student demonstrates thorough understanding of and ability to apply the knowledge and skills associated with college content-readiness.	Student is exempt from developmental course work. (K-12 and higher education officials may jointly set Grade 12 requirements to maintain the exemption.)	Within each state, students may be required to satisfactorily complete Grade 12 English and/or mathematics courses to retain the exemption from developmental course work (higher education and K-12 officials may jointly determine appropriate courses and performance standards). Students are encouraged to take appropriate advanced credit courses leading to college credit while still in high school.	Colleges may evaluate additional data (courses completed, grades, placement test scores, writing samples, etc.) to determine appropriate course placement at or above the initial credit-bearing level.
3	Student demonstrates adequate understanding of and ability to apply the knowledge and skills associated with college content-readiness.	Student is conditionally exempt from developmental course work, *contingent on evidence of sufficient continued learning in Grade 12.*	Within each state, higher education and K–12 officials may jointly determine appropriate evidence of sufficient continued learning (such as courses completed, test scores, grades or portfolios). Students are encouraged to take additional 4th year courses as well as appropriate advanced credit courses leading to college credit while in high school.	For students who demonstrate evidence of sufficient continued learning in Grade 12, colleges may evaluate additional data (courses completed, grades, portfolios, placement test scores, etc.) to determine appropriate course placement at or above the initial credit-bearing level. For students who fail to demonstrate evidence of sufficient continued learning in Grade 12, colleges also may evaluate the same types of additional data to determine placement in developmental or credit-bearing courses.

Level	Policy ALD	Description	Implications for Grade 12	Implications for High School Graduates who Immediately Enter Higher Education
2	Student demonstrates partial understanding of and ability to apply the knowledge and skills associated with college content-readiness.	Student needs support to meet college content-readiness standard.	States/districts/colleges may implement Grade 12 transition courses or other programs for these students. States also may choose to retest these students near the conclusion of Grade 12 (scoring will occur within two weeks, allowing opportunity for colleges to use scores the following fall).	Colleges may evaluate additional data (courses completed, grades, portfolios, placement test scores, etc.) to determine placement in developmental or credit-bearing courses.
1	Student demonstrates minimal understanding of and ability to apply the knowledge and skills associated with college content-readiness.	Student needs substantial support to meet college content-readiness standard.	States/districts/colleges may offer supplemental programs for these students. States also may choose to retest these students near the conclusion of Grade 12.	Colleges may evaluate additional data (courses completed, grades, portfolios, placement test scores, etc.) to determine placement in developmental or credit-bearing courses.

Further Stipulations to the College Content-readiness Policy

- **Establishment of "Cut Scores" Aligned to the Achievement Level Descriptors and College Content-readiness Policy.** In the summer of 2014, after pilot and field tests have been completed, K-12 and higher education representatives across the Consortium will jointly determine recommended cut-scores for each achievement level on the Grade 11 assessments in math and English language arts through a structured standard-setting process. Those recommended cut scores will then be subject to a vote of the Smarter Balanced Governing States. As is the case with regard to approval of the Initial Achievement Level Descriptors and College Content-readiness policy, this vote will require that K-12 and higher education representatives agree on a shared state position.

- **Updates and Revisions to the College Content-Readiness Policy.** This document is subject to revision as student performance data are collected through the pilot and field tests, as validation studies are conducted and as cut scores are established through the standard-setting process. Further, as data are collected and analyzed as a result of operational testing and use of the Smarter Balanced assessment by colleges and universities, the Consortium may choose to revisit and revise this policy.

- **Multiple Measures of Content-Readiness.** Smarter Balanced recognizes the limits of relying on a single test score for making high-stakes decisions and fully supports the use of multiple measures to determine student course placement. As a result, the policy framework encompasses the evaluation of evidence of Grade 12 learning to determine whether an exemption from developmental course work is warranted for all but the highest-performing students and the use of additional data drawn from placement tests or other sources to determine appropriate course placement in higher education. Furthermore, while this policy is focused on the Smarter Balanced assessment, within states, K–12 and higher education may establish policies that provide rigorous alternate means for students to demonstrate readiness for credit-bearing courses (grades or portfolios, other assessment scores, etc.).

- **Grade 12 Expectations.** Because even the strongest performing students' skills can erode if they do not take challenging math and English courses in Grade 12, the Content-readiness Policy provides states the option of requiring that students who have earned an exemption from developmental course work satisfactorily complete a prescribed course in Grade 12 in order to retain their exemption. At Level 3, students must provide evidence of continued learning in order to earn an exemption from developmental course work. State K–12 and higher education officials may jointly determine the necessary conditions for meeting these requirements.

- **Support for Emerging Approaches to Developmental Education.** A growing movement in higher education encourages liberal placement of students into credit-bearing courses with co-requisite supports to compensate for any knowledge or skill deficits. To clearly communicate high expectations and incentivize schools, teachers, and students, the Content-readiness Policy asks colleges to guarantee students with strong performance that they are exempt from developmental mathematics and English courses. However, it does not preclude colleges from ultimately placing any student into credit-bearing courses; this decision is left to the discretion of individual colleges and universities or college and university systems.

- **Mathematics Requirements for Advanced Courses.** The CCSS in mathematics were designed to prepare all students for entry-level college mathematics and statistics courses that typically require Algebra II or its equivalent as a prerequisite. The CCSS also include a set of standards for additional mathematics that students should learn in order to take advanced courses such as calculus, advanced statistics, or discrete mathematics. These standards are typically referred to as the "Plus Standards" because they are designated by a plus symbol (+) in the standards document. Because the Smarter Balanced Summative Assessment only assesses knowledge and skills required of all students, it does not include items and tasks aligned to the Plus Standards. The College Content-readiness Policy assumes that colleges will need to assess additional evidence (grades, placement test scores, admission test scores, etc.) for students seeking to enter more advanced mathematics courses.

- **College Content-Readiness and Admission.** The College Content-readiness Policy operates within the context of existing institutional admission policies; open-admission institutions will serve many students who do not meet the college content-readiness performance benchmark, and selective institutions may not admit students who score at Level 3 or 4 on the assessment, just as they now may not admit students with high college admission test scores or strong grade point averages. In addition, student course-taking decisions in high school will continue to be influenced by the admission requirements of colleges and universities. For example, students at Level 4 who plan to seek admission to selective institutions will make course choices for Grade 12 that comply with the requirements of those institutions. By identifying students who are either on track or ready for credit-bearing courses, high schools may be better able to advise students on college options and Grade 12 courses. Finally, at their discretion, institutions may choose to include Smarter Balanced scores among the information they consider as they make admission decisions; however, the Smarter Balanced Assessment was not designed for that purpose.

- **Score Expiration.** Consistent with the policy framework, Smarter Balanced recommends that scores only be considered valid for students who matriculate directly from high school to college.

- **Support for Students at Levels 1 and 2.** States and districts will make decisions about support for these students, and may draw from an array of existing resources. There are a number of projects underway (Southern Regional Education Board project on Transition Courses, Carnegie Foundation Quantway/Statway project, etc.) that offer model courses and other types of interventions that schools and colleges can implement to assist students in addressing academic deficiencies before leaving high school. States may choose to adopt and customize existing resources or build their own.

Next Steps

- **Validation.** It will be important to validate the adopted cut scores through an array of studies, including longitudinal studies of students who complete the Smarter Balanced assessments in Grade 11 and subsequently enter higher education as well as studies that allow colleges and universities to compare student performance on the Smarter Balanced assessment to known measures (existing admission and placement tests). As Smarter Balanced develops and implements its comprehensive validity research agenda, the Consortium welcomes input on the best approach and criterion for testing this important element of validity.

- **Institutional Participation.** In recognition that colleges will need to consider the performance standards set in Summer 2014, after the field test and standard setting process are complete, colleges will be asked to commit to implementing the College Content-readiness Policy beginning in January 2015. This timing will allow students who take the Grade 11 summative assessment in Spring 2015 to know which colleges have agreed to use their scores as evidence of readiness for credit-bearing courses, as described in the College

Content-readiness Policy. Smarter Balanced will assist colleges in making this determination by providing information on how Smarter Balanced scores compare to scores on commonly used admission and placement assessments as well as sharing results from its validation studies.

Smarter Balanced recognizes that some colleges that have an expressed interest in participating will need additional time to study student performance data before determining the appropriateness of implementing the College Content-readiness Policy given the institution's particular mission, curriculum, and student population. In addition to the information that Smarter Balanced will provide, state education agencies also may assist these colleges by arranging for access to needed student data (consistent with state policies on privacy and data sharing). After this study and review period, colleges and universities would decide whether to begin implementing the College Content-readiness Policy. As colleges complete their study and review and make the decision to implement the College Content-readiness Policy, this information will be shared with high schools, students and parents.

- **Career Readiness.** The Smarter Balanced overall claim asserts that a student can demonstrate career readiness in addition to college readiness. Smarter Balanced is committed to providing evidence of student readiness for the array of postsecondary options, as specified by the CCSS. Smarter Balanced is working with experts in career readiness to determine how the assessment can best advise students on their readiness for postsecondary career pursuits. Further information will be made available once it is ready for public review and comment.