

# Ensuring that Proficient Means Prepared

Higher Education's Commitment to College- and Career-Ready Standards and Assessments

**HIGHER ED**  
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**HIGHER STANDARDS**

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States have made great strides over the past several years in implementing more challenging K–12 standards designed to prepare students for success in college and careers. As leaders in the higher education community, we applaud that work, as it holds tremendous potential for increasing the number of students who arrive in our colleges and in businesses prepared for success.

The need for higher standards is clear. Each year, about 50 percent of first-year students at two-year colleges and 20 percent of those entering four-year universities require basic developmental courses before they can begin credit-bearing coursework. This lack of preparedness costs students and taxpayers billions of dollars each year. It stagnates our educational system and exacerbates the business community's problem of filling jobs.

On the international stage, our students trail as well. On the latest [Programme for International Student Assessment \(PISA\)](#) taken by high school students around the world, U.S. students rank 36th in math, 28th in science, and 24th in reading. And according to a recent study by the [Educational Testing Service](#), young adults in the United States (ages 16–34) rank at or near the bottom on international comparisons of problem solving, numeracy, and literacy skills.

This preparation gap is large and persistent. It puts our students at risk, and it threatens the health of our economy. Setting higher expectations for student learning is absolutely necessary if we are to close these gaps that now leave our young people at such a competitive disadvantage.

This summer and fall will mark a critical milestone in states' efforts to raise educational standards: The results of new K–12 student assessments will be released in states across the country. These new assessments represent a major step forward for students, as well as for colleges and employers. For the first time, scores on high school assessments will have a meaningful connection to college and career success: Meeting standards will mean that students are prepared for successful transition into credit-bearing college coursework and training opportunities.

Because the assessments have been purposefully pegged to a higher standard than previous state tests — a college- and career-ready standard — we expect the initial scores to be lower than what students, families and educators are used to. This should not be cause for alarm nor an indictment of our K–12 educators. The tests are simply providing a more accurate assessment of our students' readiness for the demands of postsecondary life, the need for which is validated by our own remediation numbers and employer surveys. An honest assessment of students' readiness for postsecondary pursuits taken prior to high school graduation will give educators in every state a starting point to develop pathways and supports to help more students make a successful transition.



We urge our states to remain committed to high standards. We must not back down if initial results are low. The new standards and assessments are anchored in what it takes to succeed in college and careers. We owe it to our students to maintain these higher expectations and do what it takes to help them succeed.

We are committed to working closely with our K–12 colleagues to ensure that the standards and assessments are used to support student success. The new assessments provide critical information that will allow us to identify and address skills gaps while students are still in high school, so they arrive at our institutions and work places better prepared.

We must harness these new measures to provide targeted supports and opportunities for acceleration for our high school students, such as 12th grade bridge courses, dual enrollment opportunities, and course offerings aligned to career pathways.

We must also be prepared to change practices in our higher education institutions to provide for smoother transitions for students who meet the new standards. This will include adapting our placement policies to take the new standards and assessments into account and examining freshman gateway courses to ensure they are part of clear pathways that build from the new K–12 standards and lead to meaningful degrees and credentials.

We also have a responsibility to prepare new teachers and assist veteran teachers in the delivery of high-quality instruction supporting these higher standards.

We have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to close the preparation gap by remaining committed to high expectations and doubling down on policies and programs to support student success. We must press ahead with this important work.