



In Premise, Not in Practice: Perspectives of Higher Education Personnel on the Common Core State Standards

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Key Points

- Although the public often considers the Common Core to be solely a K–12 initiative, it was designed with the higher education sector in mind, too. As a result, proponents had high hopes that the Common Core would create buy-in all the way from K–16.
- Seven years on, college personnel are generally aware and somewhat supportive of the Common Core standards. However, they tended to be more supportive of the endeavor in premise than in reality.
- At present, there does not seem to be much concrete action on campuses in response to the Common Core. The only distinct change seems to be in teacher preparation programs. Nevertheless, respondents expressed some confidence that their institutions could do more in the future.

College and career readiness is a pressing concern for the American educational system. According to 2015 results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 25 percent and 37 percent of US students in grade 12 are at or above NAEP proficiency levels in math and reading, respectively.¹ At the same time, 68.4 percent of seniors will immediately enroll in college upon leaving high school.² That means hundreds of thousands of students matriculate to college each year lacking adequate academic preparation.

Once enrolled, many students find themselves in remedial education programs in math and English to catch up to their college-ready peers. Researchers estimate that more than one-third of first-year college students are placed into remedial math or English courses.³ But they often do not catch up, with fewer than 30 percent of remedial education students ever receiving a bachelor's degree.⁴ As a

result, lackluster college readiness precludes many students from attaining a postsecondary credential and succeeding in the labor market.

College administrators and faculty have a clear interest in the preparedness of incoming students. At the same time, K–12 educators have had strong reasons to reexamine how they prepare their students for the next step. This paper explores the most wide-ranging reform to college and career readiness in the past decade—the Common Core State Standards for K–12 math and English language arts (ELA)—and the degree to which K–12 and higher education collaborated on the effort. It finds that, unfortunately, the latter constituency has had limited involvement in and influence on the standards, for several reasons.

The paper begins by outlining the history of the Common Core State Standards (hereafter called the Common Core or CCSS), detailing how their emergence influenced K–12 and postsecondary

education. Then, to ascertain the role higher education played in this reform effort, the report explores the findings of a survey of 50 college administrators and faculty in Common Core states. It concludes by discussing the implications of the survey findings.

The Development of the Common Core

Back in the 2000s, a group of prominent education organizations banded together to tackle college and career readiness challenges in the United States. Enter the Common Core, a set of rigorous K–12 math and ELA standards that states could choose to adopt. The endeavor was ambitious—adopting the Common Core meant not only changing academic standards but also developing new curricula and assessments that would be better aligned with the CCSS.

When the standards were finalized in 2010, then-US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan rejoiced that the standards and their accompanying assessments would be “an absolute game-changer in public education.” According to Duncan, they signified a “fundamental shift—reorienting K–12 education to extend beyond high school graduation to college and career-readiness.”⁵ He even proclaimed that the Common Core “may prove to be the single greatest thing to happen to public education in America since *Brown v. Board of Education*.”⁶

Over time, though, political support waned, and public opinion soured. Observers have blamed rushed policy implementation and the US Department of Education’s involvement in the standards via *Race to the Top*,⁷ among other reasons. Several states have backtracked on their initial support for Common Core and currently have their own standards or assessments.

These debates over the Common Core have largely been framed in terms of the impact on K–12 education, so naturally the public often considers the Common Core to be solely a K–12 initiative. But the Common Core was designed with higher education in mind, too. The leaders of the effort tapped three organizations they viewed as having the “greatest expertise in college readiness” to lead working groups and develop the standards—the ACT, the College Board, and Achieve Inc.⁸

College and career readiness was a major component of the criteria that the working groups used to create the Common Core standards. They defined college and career readiness as “the ability to succeed in entry-level college classes without the need for developmental education” and explained that the standards would “[remove] topics that were not essential for college success.”⁹ To evaluate what topics were superfluous, the working groups consulted university professors and hiring managers about what high school graduates needed to know and which courses they typically took before college.¹⁰

Other experts from academia were also involved in writing the standards. Professors, for instance, represented 22 of the 51 working group members for the math standards and 12 of the 50 members for the ELA standards.¹¹ They were further represented in the groups formally giving feedback on the standards, in which about half of the members were from the postsecondary sector, and in the groups that signed off on the final standards. Seventeen of the 28 members of the validation committee were higher education professors or administrators, and some states took the additional step of having their boards of higher education certify that the Common Core was sufficiently rigorous to support college and career readiness.¹²

Beyond the development of the standards, some advocates felt the Common Core was poised to affect postsecondary institutions’ everyday operations. One of the key promises of Common Core was that it would increase college readiness, therefore decreasing the need for remedial education over time. But in the interim, remedial education curricula would likely have to change alongside the curricular changes in K–12.¹³ Colleges’ general education curricula might have to change, too. And teacher preparation curricula would likely have to adjust to prepare future teachers to teach to the CCSS.

In terms of assessments, Common Core–aligned college readiness tests would likely affect admissions policies at a number of colleges. They might also help colleges place students into remedial or credit-bearing courses, especially open-access community colleges and nonselective four-year institutions that do not vet students on the front end like selective schools do.

Based on higher education’s involvement in drafting the standards and their potential implications

for K–12 and postsecondary education, Duncan and other proponents of the standards asserted that there would be top-to-bottom buy-in, all the way from K–16. However, that vision was never quite realized, and the divide between the two sectors remained a major hurdle for the Common Core.

Even if the Common Core had received more attention in higher education circles, the sector had few incentives to adjust on its own.

According to a 2010 *USA Today* article, “the creation of the standards is barely on the radar screen of many college administrators and professors . . . yet it is clear that the standards will be truly meaningful and useful only if they are fully embraced by higher education.”¹⁴ A year later, Education Trust noted that “postsecondary involvement in developing these standards has been uneven, and awareness of them has remained low in the higher education community.”¹⁵ A 2013 report by the Community College Research Center explained that “the CCSS drafting process made it difficult to obtain the large scale, higher-education sector buy-in for the standards prior to their finalization and release.” Come 2015, *Inside Higher Ed* still reported “a pretty significant disconnect between K–12 and higher education even though it’s clearly of interest in higher education to know how students are doing in K–12.”¹⁶

Even if the Common Core had received more attention in higher education circles, the sector had few incentives to adjust on its own. Lindsay Tepe of New America argues that “there is little or no pressure on colleges and universities” to align their instruction with the standards due to factors including the sheer number and diversity of postsecondary institutions and the historical disconnect between K–12 and higher education.¹⁷

Perhaps the most determinative factor, though, is the haphazard implementation of Common Core in K–12. While the standards remain in use in 43 states, only 20 of the 45 states that planned to use the Common Core–aligned assessments in 2011 still did in 2016.¹⁸ In 2017, seven states will have

their third different assessment in three years, and Missouri will have its fourth in four years.¹⁹ Meanwhile, President Donald Trump pledged at various points in his campaign to “terminate,” “end,” and “[get] rid of” the Common Core,²⁰ casting doubt on the standards’ long-term viability and further incentivizing the higher education sector to remain on the sidelines.

In short, while the Common Core was designed both to boost K–12 achievement and to prepare students for postsecondary opportunities, there seems to have been little crossover between the two spheres since the standards were approved and the assessments were implemented. This paper surveyed college personnel, asking them to explain why that is and how greater collaboration might have been achieved. More specifically, the survey asked about the role public higher education has played in adopting and implementing the Common Core, opinions of and levels of support for the endeavor in higher education circles, and the degree to which the CCSS has affected or will affect policies and practices on public college campuses.

Survey Methodology

AEI’s Center on Higher Education Reform administered a 32-question survey to college personnel at public four- and two-year colleges in states that have adopted the Common Core.²¹ To conduct this survey, AEI partnered with two higher education membership organizations, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) and the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC). We sent surveys to institutions from the 10 Common Core–participating states with the largest public postsecondary enrollments in both four-year and two-year colleges.²² We randomly selected 20 institutions from the AASCU and AACC membership lists from these 10 states, for 40 institutions in all.

AASCU and AACC then helped solicit survey liaisons from each campus. Liaisons were administrators, support staff, or individuals at any level whom the AASCU’s and AACC’s contacts deemed knowledgeable and reliable regarding institutional operations. The liaisons administered our questionnaire to five key stakeholders at their institutions. The stakeholders on each campus

included one individual from the following departments: academic affairs, admissions, developmental education/placement, English, and mathematics. These departments were chosen because they were most likely to be affected by changes associated with the standards or because their members were most likely to have been involved in developing or implementing the CCSS.

We chose this targeted method (as opposed to a blind survey of individuals from a wider range of institutions) for several reasons. First, institutions were involved in the Common Core in different capacities and to varying degrees. In addition, the Common Core potentially affects multiple facets of a college or university's operations, and those operations are organized in countless ways. We thus needed a way to navigate institutions' varied organizational structures to reach specific individuals who were involved with the CCSS and assess institutions' involvement most accurately.

We received survey responses from 10 institutions—eight four-year institutions and two community colleges. In total, we received 50 responses (from five stakeholders at each institution), for a response rate of 25 percent. We had to drop responses from one respondent due to a problem with the survey instrument (n = 49).

Because the sample was small and response rates were relatively low, we do not treat the findings as representative of the broader population of institutions or college personnel. Rather, we treat them as exploratory findings from semi-structured interviews using a fixed set of questions. Most of our findings are presented as descriptions of trends in responses, interspersed with direct quotations from respondents. We report percentages only when they are overwhelming.

Summary of Findings

Overall, our findings suggest that respondents were generally aware and somewhat supportive of the Common Core standards. However, participants tended to be more supportive of the endeavor in premise than in reality. When pressed on the specifics of Common Core implementation, respondents often said that they were not sure, or it was too early to tell, how the standards would influence their institution or higher education more broadly.

General Awareness, Opinions, and Support for the Common Core. We began the survey by asking respondents about their general awareness of the content of the Common Core standards. The majority reported they either had a “working knowledge” of the standards or were “somewhat familiar” with them. Only a small number had read or analyzed the Common Core Standards closely, and just two of the 49 respondents were not at all familiar with the Common Core. In short, most college personnel we interviewed were aware of the standards to some extent.

Respondents were lukewarm in their support for the Common Core. When asked whether they supported the CCSS, the majority of respondents indicated they were “somewhat supportive” or “neutral” about the standards (52 and 23 percent, respectively). A handful answered that they strongly supported the standards. On the other hand, just two respondents somewhat or strongly opposed the CCSS.

Indeed, strident support for the Common Core was at a premium. When we asked participants whether their state “made the right decision in adopting the Common Core,” the majority (56 percent) said that it was “too early to tell” or that they did not have an opinion. Only about one-third of respondents agreed with their state's decision to adopt the standards. As one respondent explained, “I have not studied it closely enough to make an informed decision, so I am staying neutral.” Another individual responded, “My familiarity with Common Core is limited, so it's difficult to make a determination one way or another.”

One surprising finding came when we asked participants whether they agreed with Duncan's 2013 claim that “the Common Core State Standards may prove to be the single greatest thing to happen to public education in America since *Brown v. Board of Education*.”²³ Duncan was panned in the media for this comment at the time, and a distinct majority of our respondents (75 percent) disagreed or strongly disagreed with it. But a full 25 percent *agreed* that the Common Core could compare to one of the nation's most momentous civil rights events. Their response suggests that some people might have had high hopes for the Common Core and remain sympathetic toward it today.

An important distinction, though: When respondents exhibited support, it was more for the standards in premise than in practice. For instance, participants revealed that they agreed their state made the right decision regarding the CCSS in broad strokes or in theory. As one respondent explained, “I think every well-intended effort to improve education is important.” Other participants offered similar sentiments:

- “I believe that it is meaningful to use common expectations and consistent standards for states and schools to ensure that students will be adequately prepared for college and careers.”
- “My understanding of the Common Core is that students will be better prepared not only for college, but additionally, the skills imparted will provide a stronger K–12 education overall—college-bound or not. Likewise, teachers will be challenged to provide a current curriculum in support of the Core.”

However, when they began to discuss specifics, many respondents who generally supported the Common Core voiced reservations:

- “In general, the idea of educational standards common for every student in the US is a good one. The worry is that Common Core, like so many other past and present national and state educational initiatives, will become simply an unproductive burden on students and teachers.”
- “Although I believe in the goals of Common Core and its platform, I do not believe the adoption process happened slowly and methodically enough. For example, starting with K–5 first and slowly rolling out to later grades. I also believe that teacher education and public awareness lagged behind in the adoption process and resulted in a large pushback. Much of the resentment from educators has stemmed from feeling ill-equipped to adapt to new standards.”

Interestingly, certain individuals who responded that it was “too early to tell” whether their state made the right decision expressed support for the standards, but they were wary of the accompanying college and career readiness assessments. One individual explained that the “Common Core

standards make sense, but the uniform assessments can be problematic.” Another went further, conceding that “having a curriculum that teaches fewer topics with more depth is a good idea,” but “the assessment is a horrible idea.” A third respondent cautioned that while “Common standards are a good idea for uniformity of preparation . . . a common assessment will drive instruction and is not advisable.” Despite their reservations, though, only three respondents answered that their state had made the wrong decision in adopting the standards.

Similarly, participants were asked about their views on the CCSS in relation to college readiness: “Do you believe the implementation of Common Core will have an effect on the percentage of first-year students who show up prepared to take credit-bearing, college-level courses?” A plurality of individuals again responded, “It’s too early to tell” or “I don’t have an opinion.” One-quarter of respondents believed the Common Core would improve college readiness rates, while less than a quarter of respondents thought it would have neutral or negative effects.

In sum, respondents seemed generally aware and somewhat supportive of the standards. But, when narrowing the discussion, support waned, and respondents expressed reservations or uncertainty about the specifics of the endeavor.

How Were College Personnel Involved with the Common Core? Participants’ awareness and general opinions of the CCSS are likely shaped in part by the degree to which they participated in developing and implementing the standards and assessments. Therefore, we asked them about their personal levels of involvement, as well as that of the higher education sector, their institutions, and their states.

First, the majority of respondents felt that higher education writ largely played a limited role or no role whatsoever in developing the Common Core standards. Nearly three-quarters of respondents indicated that higher education “played a minor role” or “did not play a role.” Just two respondents indicated higher education was the “main driver” of the development of the standards, while roughly one-fifth of respondents thought higher education made “a significant contribution.”

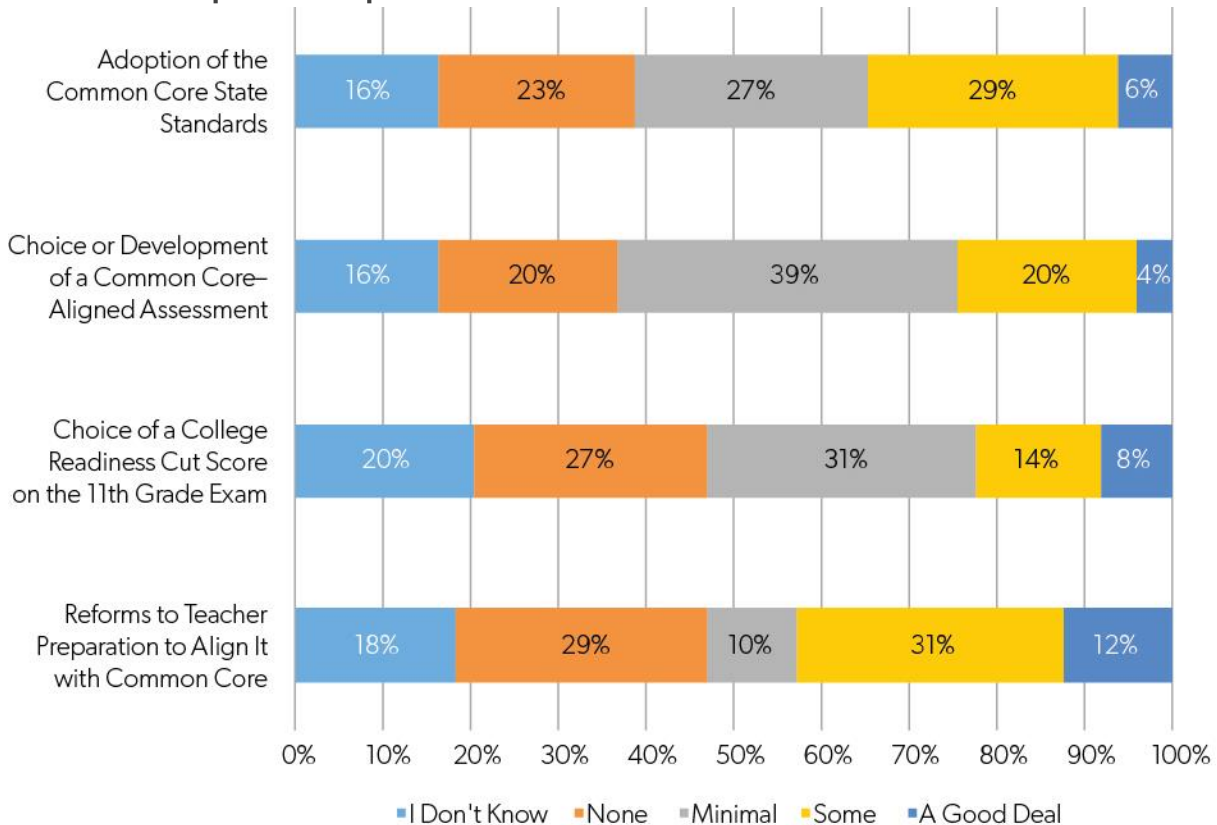
Regarding the development of Common Core-aligned assessments, respondents had slightly more muted responses about the role higher education played. No respondent contended that higher education was a “main driver” for developing the assessments, and only one-fifth thought higher education made a significant contribution. A significant majority believed higher education played a minor role or did not play a role at all (56 percent and 23 percent, respectively).

Not only did participants view higher education in general as having a limited role in developing the standards, but they depicted an even more limited role for their own institutions. When asked whether “you or any of your colleagues” played a formal role in the state’s adoption of the Common Core, more than three-quarters of the 49 respondents answered, “Not that I know of.” When asked whether “you or any of your colleagues” played a formal role in choosing or developing a Common Core-aligned assessment, nearly all participants responded,

“Not that I know of.” Furthermore, when asked whether anyone at their institution played a role in choosing “the college readiness cut score” on their state’s Common Core assessment, all but one participant indicated, “Not that I know of.” Thus, while survey respondents felt that some individuals in higher education somewhere played some role with the Common Core and its accompanying assessments, knowledge of those individuals at their own institutions was scant.

Of course, the personnel we surveyed could have come from institutions that did not actively engage with the Common Core. To evaluate that possibility, we asked participants how much influence “the public higher education institutions in your state” had on the CCSS in terms of its adoption, the choice or development of an aligned assessment, the choice of a college readiness cut score, and reforms to teacher preparation to align with the standards. (The cut score is a selected point on the score scale of a college readiness exam that

Figure 1. How Much Influence Would You Say the Other Public Colleges in Your State Have Had on Your State’s Adoption and Implementation of the Common Core?



Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.
Source: Authors.

represents the minimum score indicating that a student is prepared for college-level work in a given subject area.) As shown in Figure 1, less than half of respondents thought other public colleges had “some” or “a good deal” of influence across all four areas.

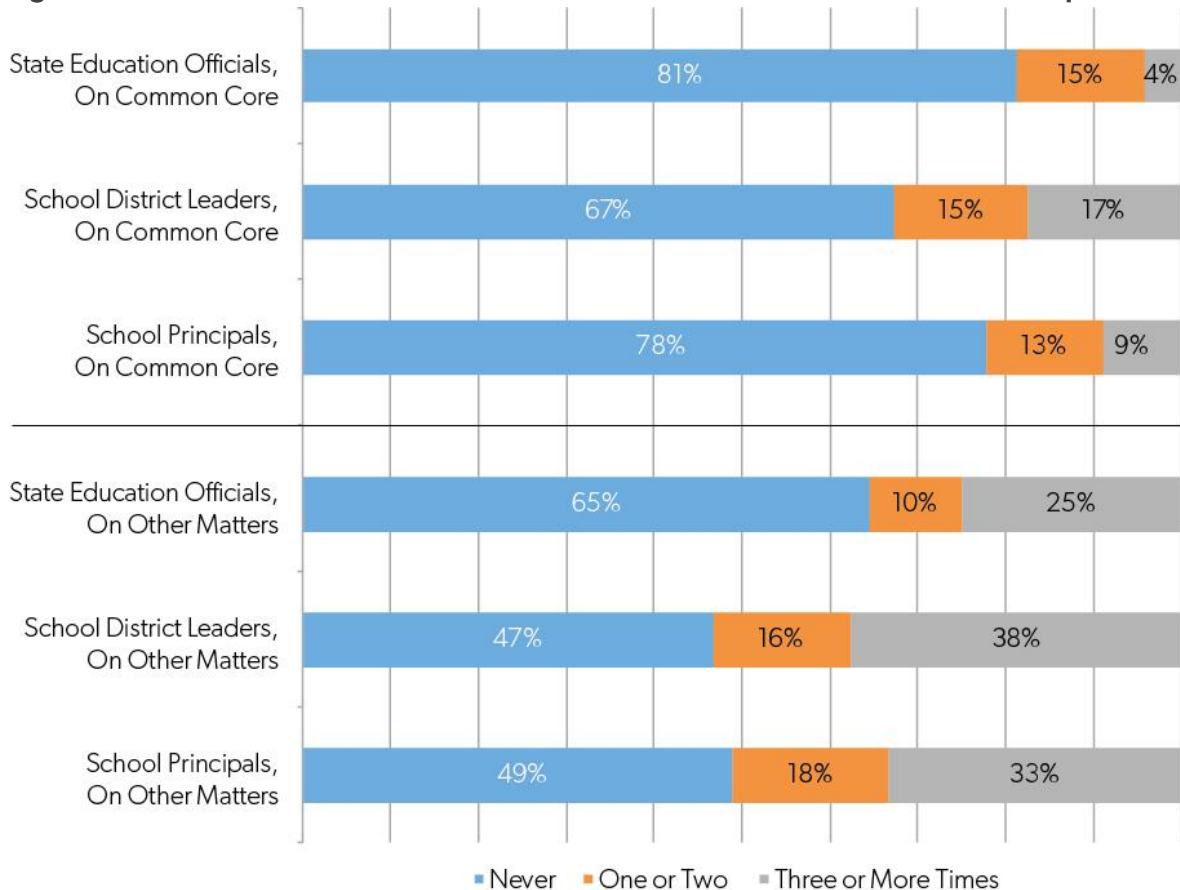
Then, when asked whether they knew anyone from the other public institutions in their state who played a role in the development, adoption, or implementation of the Common Core, respondents resoundingly responded no (94 percent). Even when the question was broadened to include private or out-of-state institutions, nearly all respondents (94 percent) did not know anyone who was involved with the Common Core. That is not necessarily surprising, as the Common Core initiative is borne out of a given state’s public education system. But it underscores the abject lack of knowledge from

our survey participants of anyone involved with the Common Core.

Does the Common Core Affect Institutional Operations? Even if the postsecondary personnel we surveyed were largely unaware of specific individuals involved with the Common Core, institutional operations could still be changing in response to the standards and aligned assessments. Put simply, while they may not have been actively involved or aware of any others’ involvement, they may be experiencing certain effects nonetheless. To gain a sense of the Common Core’s influence on college campuses, we asked participants questions pertaining to everyday campus operations, including admissions, remedial education, and teaching and learning.

To start, we asked participants, “How many meetings on the subject of the Common Core have

Figure 2. How Often Have You Met with K–12 Officials on the Common Core or Other Topics?



Notes: Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding. For this question, n = 48, as one respondent did not provide an answer.

Source: Authors.

you attended on your campus?” Unsurprisingly, roughly three-quarters of the 49 respondents answered, “None.” One in six respondents indicated, “One or two”; fewer than one in 10 answered, “Three or more.” As such, it is not clear that the colleges we sampled are actively engaging administrators and faculty on the matter.

But perhaps K–12 leaders are engaging with their postsecondary counterparts on the issue. We also asked participants how often in the past five years they had met with individuals from K–12 systems—state education officials, school district leaders, or school principals—to discuss the Common Core. As shown in Figure 2, a clear majority of respondents said they had never met with each type of official about the standards. However, one-third of respondents had met with a school district leader at least once in the past five years regarding the CCSS.

When we asked participants how often they met with K–12 officials on topics other than the Common Core, slightly more respondents noted they had met with K–12 leaders at least once. In fact, just over half of respondents had held at least one meeting with a district leader or a school principal in the past five years. Respondents generally indicated that formal engagement between higher education and K–12 was infrequent. And when they did engage, the CCSS was rarely on the docket.

Even without frequent meetings between the two sectors, the Common Core could still influence various facets of campus operations. To gauge this, we asked participants to indicate all the ways in which their institution intended to use the 11th-grade Common Core assessments. More than 60 percent of respondents said their institutions planned to use the assessment scores in some manner. About 30 percent indicated their school would use assessment results to “diagnose student needs and provide academic support like advising and tutoring.” Roughly one-fifth of respondents indicated their school would use assessment scores to place students into remedial education; a similar number answered that their school planned to use them to advise students in course and program selection. A smaller fraction (15 percent) indicated that scores on the Common Core assessments would be used in admission decisions.

Conversely, more than a third of the 49 respondents indicated that their institutions did not intend to use

assessment scores in any way. Seventy percent said they would not use the 11th-grade assessments to provide academic support, 80 percent would not use them to place students into remedial education, and 85 percent would not use them to help inform students’ course selection.

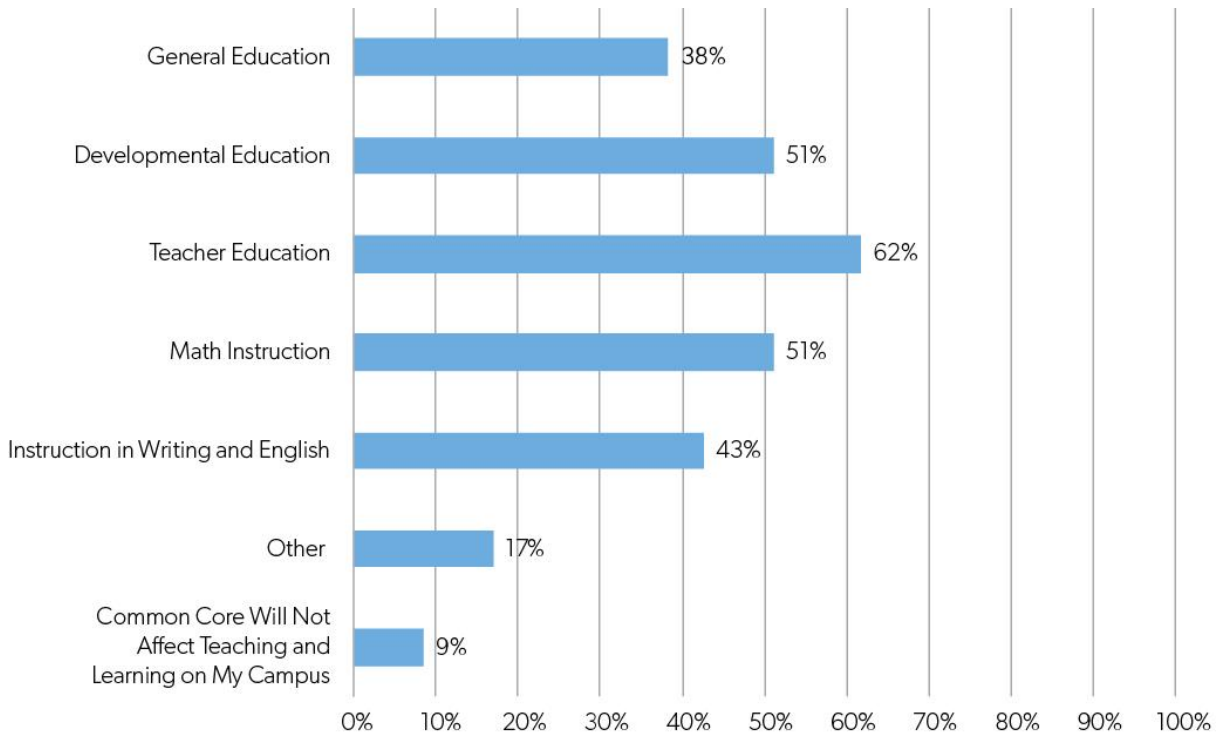
A number of respondents (30 percent) were unsure how their institution would use the assessment scores. They offered speculative responses such as “We may likely use the scores for admission, but nothing has been decided” and “I don’t actually know, but I imagine . . . we might use a particular student’s scores to place that student in college courses. . . . If the Common Core assessments work well for placement and remove barriers to students entering and succeeding in college, we would likely consider using [them].”

This pattern of responses mostly comports with those from earlier questions: As we asked more specific questions about the CCSS and its implementation, the responses became more uncertain or ambiguous. That continued when we asked respondents how their institution planned to use assessment scores for admissions, placement into remedial education, and teaching and learning.

With respect to admissions processes, roughly half of the 49 respondents indicated they did not know, and another 15 percent indicated their institution had not yet decided. Twenty percent responded that their institution would not use assessment results in admissions decisions. Just one respondent asserted that Common Core assessments would serve as “a minimum admissions requirement”; another four respondents indicated assessment scores would be a contributing factor.

With respect to remediation, the majority of respondents again voiced uncertainty. Roughly 40 percent replied, “I’m not sure,” and just over 20 percent answered, “Our campus has not decided whether to use the 11th-grade scores yet.” Eight respondents said their school would not use the 11th-grade scores to make placement decisions, while five indicated their school would use the scores as one of several measures of college readiness. No respondents indicated that students who met the college-ready cut score in 11th grade would automatically be eligible for credit-bearing courses at their institution.

Figure 3. Do You Think the Implementation of the Common Core Will Affect the Following Areas at Your School?



Note: This figure indicates the percentage of respondents who answered yes for each area. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding. For this question, n = 47, as two respondents did not provide an answer.
Source: Authors.

Just because respondent colleges are mostly not using assessment scores for placement purposes does not preclude their support for the practice in the future. In open-ended responses to this question and others, survey respondents indicated that, over time, the Common Core assessments could help colleges better determine college readiness.

- “I think if a student demonstrates proficiency then, even if they test into developmental courses based on our institution’s placement test, the student will be excused from or accelerated through the developmental sequence.”
- “I am not sure how it will affect them, but I suspect that our developmental education (which is only offered in math at this time) will consider [college and career ready] 11th-grade scores as part of a broader picture.”

Respondents noted that perhaps the greatest opportunity for the CCSS is to prepare students better for college-level work, meaning fewer students would need remediation in college. As

one participant put it: “The expectation is that students’ base knowledge will be enhanced when exiting high school.” Another respondent went a step further: “There’s the hope that students will be better prepared, [and] we may see fewer sections of developmental education courses and more incoming students going directly into college-level courses.” One participant stated forthrightly that “successful implementation of Common Core standards will lead to less remediation.” Again, though, these statements are mostly speculative. They describe the theoretical benefits of the Common Core down the road, presuming effective implementation in the near term.

Finally, survey participants weighed in on how the Common Core might affect teaching and learning at their institution. Respondents were generally more confident that the Common Core would have influence in this area. As shown in Figure 3, 61 percent of respondents believe the Common Core will affect teacher education. Additionally, 51 percent and 43 percent believe it will affect math and writing/English instruction, respectively.

Unlike with admissions and developmental education, respondents explained that their campuses have already tried to align their curricula with the standards in various respects. As respondents put it:

- “We have spent some time realigning our curriculum to match some aspects of CCSS.”
- “We have revised methods courses to integrate the standards for planning instruction and assessing learning.”
- “Developmental mathematics courses had to be aligned to the Common Core. This affected our higher-level classes too. Math instructors will need to be trained with the new curriculum along with new supporting materials.”

Survey participants explained that the most salient changes in response to the Common Core thus far are in teacher preparation. In their own words:

- “We have already made significant changes over the past five years to align all teacher [preparation] efforts with CCSS . . . for both elementary and secondary school teachers in their majors. We are now working on general education and remedial courses.”
- “Teacher education must adapt to new standards so that the educators we produce will be able to prepare their students for success in the Common Core model.”
- “The Common Core standards for math have already changed how we prepare future teachers. We have transitioned to incorporating the math content standards and the standards for mathematical practice into our math courses for future teachers.”

Overall, at present, there does not seem to be much engagement or concrete action on campuses in response to the Common Core. The only distinct change seems to have occurred in teacher preparation programs. At the same time, respondents did express some confidence that their institutions would use the assessment scores from the high school exams in some way in the future.

What Could Have Been Done Better—And What to Do Next? We concluded the survey by asking

respondents to reflect on higher education’s engagement with the CCSS initiative: Do you think that higher education broadly had enough of a say in developing and implementing the Common Core standards and assessments? What is one thing states or districts could do to engage higher education moving forward?

To the first question, respondents gave a range of answers. Nearly half of the 49 respondents answered no. As one individual noted, “While the idea is admirable, our input has been minimal.” Another echoed the sentiment: “Higher education had little to no input, and those who did had little understanding of the CCSS.” Others conceded they had some input, but “[we] would have liked more input *before* implementation.”

Two respondents did express different thoughts. One concluded that “based on my limited knowledge about Common Core standards and assessment, it seems to me that higher education contributed sufficiently to the processes.” Another respondent was pleased with higher education’s level of involvement: “With a seat at the table during the development of the standards, I think our interests have been addressed.” Notably, however, that respondent did not mention higher education’s involvement in implementation.

In response to the latter question, many respondents simply urged districts to seek more input from higher education circles, and their solutions were fairly basic. One respondent just wanted K–12 leaders to “ask for our participation. No one has asked yet, simple as that. University-level mathematics educators can make an important contribution.” Another participant wanted an invitation: “School districts could actually invite higher education institutions into their conversations and meetings [regarding the Common Core].” A third suggestion: “Just ask us what skills we think are important.” These recommendations further suggest that engagement between the two sectors has been minimal.

To generate greater cross-sector engagement, some respondents envisioned formal settings where district leaders and state officials could communicate recent changes with their postsecondary counterparts. Suggestions included:

- “Invite representatives from higher ed institutions to a daylong symposium on the

Common Core and what the higher ed institutions can expect regarding cut scores, placement info (how will we even get it?), and the curricula, and thus what we can expect students to know when they arrive, etc.”

- “In many districts, institutions work collaboratively and intersegmentally to create seamless transitions for their students to the next-level institution. Adding professional development and informational meetings about Common Core and higher education would be very welcome.”
- “Have meetings with the appropriate people at each institution that have the power to change curriculum, but also include the professors and teachers. You need to include the teachers that are teaching the material and students.”

A few others had slightly more specific recommendations. They urged district leaders to ask faculty to “write and evaluate the end-of-course K–12 exams,” “help assess curricula and assessment tools,” and “learn how defined skill sets are used in a college classroom.”

Furthermore, participants requested that districts look to higher education for research on the Common Core. As one respondent put it, “as the dataset for assessment grows, it would be good to have ongoing conversations—and research—about student performance and how it relates to college success.” On a similar note, another participant suggested that colleges and districts “work together, especially with local education researchers, to ask key questions about what works and does not with the CCSS.”

These responses are just starting points and will need to be developed into actionable next steps for the Common Core and its various stakeholders. While the vagueness of responses could be interpreted as a general lack of engagement with Common Core in higher education, it is also quite plausible that the method of asking (a survey), question phrasing, or size of the response box encouraged succinctness and broad thinking over more nuanced responses. Either way, the question of what to do next is ripe for additional thought and debate among practitioners, policymakers, and observers alike.

Discussion

When the Common Core was first conceptualized, proponents billed it as a way to raise K–12 standards and prepare students to succeed in higher education and the workforce. While the effort has soured in the K–12 sector, our survey suggests that an unexpected number of higher education administrators still believe the Common Core can be the game changer Duncan predicted it would be back in 2010. A quarter of our respondents agreed that Common Core could be “the single greatest thing to happen to public education in America since *Brown v. Board of Education*,” a comment for which Duncan was roundly pilloried. And only two of our respondents were “somewhat” or “strongly” opposed to the standards, a far cry from the blowback in K–12.

None of this is to say that higher education has gone all-in on the Common Core. Few administrators have read the standards closely or know someone who worked on their development, and they generally perceive the higher education community to have had limited influence on the standards. Most tellingly, when asked to comment on the specifics of Common Core implementation rather than its general premise, respondents became more equivocal. They frequently responded that they were not sure or it was too early to tell how the standards would influence their institution in particular or higher education more broadly. It is important to remember that we surveyed personnel from only a handful of institutions, but their responses make sense in the bigger picture given that we do not yet have results from Common Core–aligned assessments and that it is unclear how committed the Trump administration will be to the standards.

Similarly, it is not clear from our findings that there is robust discussion among K–12 leaders about facilitating buy-in with the postsecondary community. When asked how K–12 could better engage higher education on the Common Core, our higher education respondents generally indicated that K–12 needed to seek more input, be more communicative, and work more collaboratively. Some respondents also mentioned that K–12 could tap the expertise of postsecondary faculty to comment on the standards and assessments and help analyze the results of the assessments and their implications for schools and colleges alike.

Despite these missed chances and lack of engagement, the higher education personnel we surveyed generally remained open-minded to the Common Core. This means that there is still an opportunity for the effects of the Common Core to reach higher education. In theory, buy-in from both K–12 and higher education would give colleges more information about prospective students’ preparedness.

But we face a crossroads as a nation: With the standards and assessments still in use in states across the nation, do we bet on their potential upside and commit to moving forward despite our missteps? Or do we treat the endeavor as a sunk cost and design a new path forward that could cultivate

stronger buy-in from states? If we decide to double down on the Common Core, K–12 and higher education will need to reflect on these findings and other research and make the most of their second chance to work together. And if we decide to pursue another path, we should reflect on these findings to avoid making the same mistakes.

Delivering on the Common Core’s full potential requires support from both K–12 and higher education, a commitment to work together to implement and improve them, and clear lines of communication. To many, the Common Core effort sounded promising on all these fronts, but it has not yet brought K–12 and higher education together in common cause.

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