Core Values: Making the Case for the Common Core

By Stephen G. Pelletier

If they hope to reap its benefits for higher education, public universities need to help make the case for the Common Core.

Looking at the educational standards known as the Common Core from the perspective of higher education, one might say, “What’s not to like?” The standards raise the bar so that more students will graduate from high school “college ready” in mathematics and English language arts. Assuming the standards are successful, that means that fewer students will need remediation in university-level courses—and that more students will succeed in college overall.

In the abstract, therefore, it stands to reason that colleges and universities ought to be strong supporters of the Common
Core. But colleges and universities live not in the abstract but in the real world. And the reality is that the Common Core has been taken up by some political circles as a wedge issue, and has thus become a flashpoint for sometimes rancorous political debate.

Look past all the shouting, though, and it remains clear that the Common Core advances educational quality in general—and offers significant benefits for higher education. A challenge for AASCU leaders, therefore, is to balance political considerations in their states with the potentially substantial benefits that the Common Core can bring to their institutions. In other words, in practical terms, how should AASCU leaders step up to help make the case for the Common Core?

**Benefits for Higher Education**

In 2009, governors and education commissioners from 48 states, territories and the District of Columbia launched a program to establish national educational standards for math and English literacy at the K-12 level. Known as the “Common Core,” the standards are designed to prepare students to graduate from high school “college ready” in English language arts and mathematics—that is, high school graduates will be prepared to succeed in entry-level postsecondary courses without the need for remediation, or will be ready to enter the workforce. The standards were adopted by 44 states, which have been working to implement them.

If implementation of the Common Core is successful, higher education has much to gain:

- There are potential financial benefits—students who are ready to succeed in higher education without remediation or with reduced remediation are more cost-effective for colleges and universities to educate.
- There are implications for improved student success—if more students are adequately prepared for college-level work, more will be likely to succeed in college.
- If more entry-level college students are better prepared academically, that should translate into improved higher education outcomes, such as increased first-year success rates, better retention rates, reduced time to degree, and improved graduation rates. While bolstering student success is intrinsically an important goal, it is particularly vital today given the national focus on increased postsecondary accountability and effectiveness.

- Adoption of the Common Core standards opens new doors for higher education to collaborate with K-12. For example, opportunities to better synchronize teacher education programs with the curricular material that students in K-12 need to know create natural ways for secondary schools and universities to work together.
- The Common Core standards support a P-16 continuum that would likely introduce more students to college-level work while they are still in high school—and nurture a pipeline that could connect future college students to a given university before they enroll in higher education.

**Political Challenges**

The context for the Common Core also includes political realities. Education policy being a perpetual lightning rod for debate, the Common Core has been swept up in today’s divisive political climate and is a point of contention in many states. Some critics of the Common Core frame their concern as a states’ rights issue, suggesting that the standards are being forced on states by national interests and the federal government. Some have gone so far as to label the standards “Obamacore.”

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challenges to the Common Core are in play or under discussion in other states.

**Roles for AASCU Leaders**

Given this background, what are appropriate roles for leaders of AASCU institutions around the Common Core? Going head-to-head with powerful political constituencies is probably not in the interest of any public university. Still, the stakes around the Common Core and improving student performance are so important to higher education, and so in sync with higher education’s mission on behalf of students, that not taking a position is probably not an option. Without needing to go to the extreme, there is plenty of room for AASCU presidents to participate productively in the conversation about the Common Core.

One role ties to the tradition of AASCU institutions as stewards of place and important contributors to the general quality of life in their regions. In that sense, suggests Ronald A. Jetty, director of P-16 initiatives for the University of Wisconsin System, the Common Core creates “a major opportunity for AASCU institutions to serve as resources for the surrounding school districts to engage in all kinds of important conversations. What is college readiness? How do we make the senior year in high school more meaningful? How do we reduce remediation so that when students get to campus they can start work in credit-bearing courses?” Jetty argues that participating in these kinds of discussions meshes well with the founding missions of many AASCU institutions in training teachers for the communities and states that they serve. He says that leveraging discussions around the Common Core to focus with K-12 on vital questions about education “is really kind of renewing history, if you will, for our institutions.”

Susan J. Koch, chancellor of the Springfield campus of the University of Illinois, suggests that work around the Common Core creates natural opportunities for colleges to deepen their partnerships with local schools. Observing that it is in higher education’s best interests to have highly qualified students graduating from high school, Koch says that “we are interested in any collaboration with K-12 schools that will help students come to campus better prepared.” Koch says that it is appropriate for university leaders to be “continually reaching out to K-12 in working to help ensure student success at all levels, because when they are more successful, we are more successful.”

“In Illinois, there have been some questions and controversies related to these new competencies,” Koch says. “[The Common Core standards] are harder, and there are concerns about student success. Regardless of that, we try to stand with the K-12 schools as much as we can, because really we all have the same mission. We all want students to graduate from high school and move successfully into the postsecondary experience.”

Like Jetty and Koch, Nancy L. Zimpher, chancellor of the State University of New York, sees a connection between the Common Core and the teacher education mission that is so intrinsically part of the tradition and history of AASCU institutions. “We prepare the teachers who prepare the students who come to college ready or not,” Zimpher says. “We own this challenge. So the clarion call for higher education is to understand that we are inextricably linked to education that occurs before kids come to college. And for me, that’s from early childhood on, or from cradle to career.”

Accordingly, AASCU institutions can show leadership around the Common Core by strengthening teacher education. “One of the key roles for our institutions, which prepare about 50 percent of new teachers each year, is to revitalize teacher preparation programs around the Common Core,” says Jolanda M. Westerhof, director of teacher education at AASCU. “These assessments are going to require students to show mastery and understanding of content with what we think of as much higher-order thinking skills. If we don’t prepare teachers to teach that way, their respective and prospective K-12 students won’t be adequately prepared.”

In that regard, for example, teacher education faculty at the University of Illinois at Springfield have participated in training designed to effectively transform the university’s teacher education curriculum to prepare new teachers based on Common Core standards.

Test scores in respective subject areas under the Common Core will likely help inform future definitions of college
readiness. That opens another channel for conversation about the Common Core. Zimpher, for example, argues that the Common Core standards provide a forum for colleges to dive more deeply into discussions about what it means to be “college ready.” The Common Core standards were walked back from ‘readiness’ to determine what it takes to perform well in college courses,” she says, “so in many respects, the standards emanated out of what we value in higher education.”

Yet another role for higher education is that it will be universities that really put the new standards to the test. “College-ready standards will become truly meaningful when associated levels of student performance are fully embraced by higher education,” Westerhof says. “Only higher education leaders and faculty can authenticate [the standards] through experience performance expectations aligned with those standards.” When a student comes to college and has been deemed college-ready in math or English language arts, it will be up to universities, Westerhof says, to determine whether the student is “in fact ready for freshman-level course work in those subject areas.”

Depending on the political climate in different states, leaders of AASCU institutions may be positioned to take an active role in explaining the value of the Common Core to the general public. This past April, for example, Zimpher published an op-ed about the Common Core in the prominent newspaper, Newsday. She wrote, “Raising standards in our classrooms isn’t a regional or partisan issue. It is a common sense one…These common sense reforms will ensure that New York continues to lead.”

Westerhof suggests that university leaders can use the authority of their positions and their expertise in education to help explain the value of the Common Core standards, especially in states where the new standards may replace less rigorous benchmarks. By voicing their perspectives publicly, Westerhof says, university presidents, deans and provosts can put the Common Core in context and help reassure the public that even if the immediate transition to the new standards proves somewhat painful—it has been predicted that, initially, student performance will drop because the standards are rigorous—“this is a transition that is worth going through.” As part of that role in helping to educate the public, Westerhof also suggests that AASCU leaders in states that use the Common Core can and should underscore to students and their parents that colleges will expect students to work to those standards and will weigh students’ ability to do that as part of their admissions process.

To fully reap the benefits of the Common Core, higher education will ultimately need to help see that the standards are implemented, tested and refined. University curricula, particularly in teacher education, will need to be revised to align with Common Core standards. Part of this may be a public relations challenge. If K-12 student test scores drop initially as predicted under the Common Core standards, it will be important for leaders in higher education to help parents understand the reasons behind the drop and to help K-12 schools explain that tougher standards are a benchmark in the road to better student performance. Collaboration between higher ed and K-12 is going to be critical to help manage expectations in the transition phase to the new standards.

Development of the Common Core was “a phenomenal event, catalyzed by governors and chief state school officers, to really set a higher bar for America,” Zimpher says. “This will not happen again in most of our lifetimes. If we let this opportunity pass, we will have lost a seminal opportunity to raise the bar for American elementary and secondary education and higher education.”

“I think AASCU presidents and deans have to speak out on this issue and help the public understand that setting high standards does not control the curriculum and does not necessarily have to be entangled with teacher evaluation or testing strategies,” Zimpher says. “And that the Common Core standards raise the bar [for student success]. And then, we have to help our colleagues in K-12—not only through teacher professional development, but also the teachers that we prepare—to get it right.”

Based in Rockville, Md., Stephen G. Pelletier writes regularly about higher education.

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