

About the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium

1. What is the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium?

The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium is a service provided by a public institution (University of California, Los Angeles), governed by member states/territories and funded with member state/territory fees.¹ Smarter Balanced has developed next-generation assessments to accurately measure student progress toward college and career readiness in English language arts/literacy (ELA) and mathematics. Complete information on the Consortium and its assessments, including full practice tests for each grade and subject, can be found at www.smarterbalanced.org.

2. What tests has Smarter Balanced developed?

Smarter Balanced has developed a system of valid, reliable and fair next-generation assessments aligned to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in ELA and mathematics for grades 3 through 8 and high school. The system—which includes both summative assessments for accountability purposes and optional interim assessments for instructional use—integrates computer adaptive testing (CAT) technologies 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 provides materials to help teachers address learning challenges and differentiate instruction.

Smarter Balanced assessments 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 test questions. The performance tasks are taken on a computer (but are not computer adaptive) and 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 for 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 following criteria guided the development of the standards:

¹ Any unused funds are used as directed by governing members in subsequent years.

- Alignment with expectations for college and career success
- Clarity
- Consistency across all states
- Inclusion of content and the application of knowledge through high-order skills
- Improvement upon current state standards and standards of top-performing nations
- Reality-based for effective use in the classroom
- Evidence- and research-based²

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 2011 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.³

4. How did Smarter Balanced ensure its assessments reflect the CCSS?

Smarter Balanced built its assessments to align as closely as possible to the CCSS. Through its member states, and in consultation with the lead standards writers and other national experts, Smarter Balanced translated the CCSS into assessment targets, test blueprints and, ultimately, assessment items and performance tasks. The Consortium also established an operational definition of college content-readiness and performance benchmarks that define the level of content and skill mastery that marks students as academically prepared for college in English language arts and mathematics (see <http://www.smarterbalanced.org/smarter-balanced-assessments/> for access to all test design documents). Identifying the test scores that align to those performance standards occurred in Fall 2014 (see Question 10).

5. How do the Smarter Balanced assessments differ from the Common Core State Standards?

To the extent possible, the Smarter Balanced Assessment System measures the full depth and breadth of the knowledge and skills specified in the CCSS. However, it is not 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

6. What are the benefits of establishing a college readiness policy using the Smarter Balanced assessments?

Establishing a college readiness policy using the Smarter Balanced Grade 11 summative assessments provides a number of benefits to students and parents, schools, and colleges and universities:

² Frequently Asked Questions, Common Core State Standards. Available at <http://www.corestandards.org>.

³ 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/>.

Students and Parents:

- Gain a clear understanding of colleges' requirements for demonstrating readiness for entry-level courses.
- Receive an early warning about students' readiness for entry-level, credit-bearing courses, allowing students and parents to work with their high school to use the senior year productively so that developmental courses can be avoided.
- See a tangible link between the high school program of study and the knowledge and skills needed for success after graduation.

Schools:

- Gain a clear understanding of colleges' requirements for demonstrating readiness for entry-level courses.
- Receive valuable information to plan interventions for students along the performance continuum.
- Benefit from students having a personal stake in the Smarter Balanced assessments, taking them seriously, and putting forth their best effort.
- Can be assured that teaching the standards is the best route to meeting performance goals since the assessments have been designed for alignment to the standards.

Colleges and Universities:

- Provide clear signals to teachers and schools about the level of preparation required for entry-level courses.
- Reduce the need for developmental education by co-creating Grade 12 (and earlier) interventions with K-12 designed to address students' academic deficiencies while they are still in high school.
- Free up resources currently devoted to developmental education to expand and enrich other credit-bearing courses.

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

A primary goal of Smarter Balanced is securing commitments from higher education institutions to recognize the agreed-upon uniform performance level on the 11th grade summative assessment—in combination with locally established Grade 12 requirements—as evidence that students are ready for entry-level, transferable, credit-bearing courses in English and mathematics and can be exempted from remedial or developmental coursework. If students score at or above the college-ready level and wish to take more advanced courses, additional information such as Grade 12 course taking and performance would be needed to make 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. For more detailed information on using Smarter Balanced scores for course placement, please see the College Content-Readiness Policy (<http://www.smarterbalanced.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/College-Content-Readiness-Policy.pdf>).

8. 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.

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

Schools or districts can administer the optional Smarter Balanced Interim Comprehensive Assessment, which mirrors the end-of-year summative assessment, to inform course scheduling for Grade 12. The Interim Assessment Blocks allow teachers to test student understanding of related clusters of standards and support targeted instructional intervention. For more information on the interim assessments, visit <http://www.smarterbalanced.org/interim-assessments/>.

Setting College and Career Readiness Performance Benchmarks

10. How were the achievement standards set for defining college and career readiness? Who weighed in on these decisions?

The threshold scores for the four achievement levels on the Smarter Balanced summative and interim comprehensive assessments were developed using a highly inclusive multi-stage process that involved K-12 teachers and other educators, higher education faculty, parents, business leaders, and other community members.

- The process included an in-person panel at which close to 500 educators, higher education faculty, parents, and business and community leaders nominated by Consortium members went through assessment questions at each grade level and recommended where to set the achievement levels.
- There was also an online panel to open the doors to the process to all who wanted to be part of this important effort. More than 2,600 people participated in the online panel.
- The recommendations of both the in-person and online groups were reviewed by a cross-grade review committee that ensured that the achievement levels align appropriately across grades 3 through 8 and 11.
- Finally, technical panels and an external auditor reviewed the recommendations before they were presented to states for approval.

College and university faculty were involved at all stages of this process to ensure that the achievement levels for the Grade 11 assessments reflected higher education expectations for college readiness.

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, it is expected 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.

Using and Interpreting Smarter Balanced Assessment Scores

12. Are there higher education institutions that have already agreed to use the Smarter Balanced assessments?

Yes. The California State University system and participating California community colleges will use the Smarter Balanced assessments as part of their longstanding Early Assessment Program. The public higher education institutions in Washington and West Virginia also will use the

assessments to measure readiness for entry-level courses. Additional higher education institutions are expected to announce their participation in 2015.

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

Higher education systems and institutions are free to set their own policies, but the recommendation of the Smarter Balanced College Content-readiness Policy is that scores be considered only for students who matriculate directly to higher education after completing high school.

14. 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.

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

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

16. Has Smarter Balanced issued 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?

The Smarter Balanced College Content-Readiness Policy, which was approved by Governing States in spring 2013, establishes a framework to guide use of Smarter Balanced scores, including state or system-level determination of additional evidence to evaluate student learning during grade 12. See <http://www.smarterbalanced.org/achievement-level-descriptors-and-college-readiness/> for further information.