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Getting Serious About College Readiness

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As someone who works with many states to improve education, I'm deeply troubled by the lack of our national progress — and the missing urgency in postsecondary education — toward improving students' readiness for college and their prospects for completing college degrees.

Many in postsecondary education agree the readiness problem must be addressed, and a few states have taken strong early steps toward a solution. So, why haven't we moved closer to solving the readiness problem?

The largest obstacle is that all of postsecondary education still does not see the readiness problem and the elements of addressing it in the same ways. Some question the size of the problem. Some fear that students' access to higher learning could be at risk. Others fear that admissions would be affected, or believe that we can solve it simply by requiring more high school courses, or that readiness is more of a problem for high schools to solve.

We must come together in postsecondary education on many of these points if we are to prepare far greater numbers of students for college. ACT Inc. estimates that 60 percent to 70 percent of its test takers are not well-prepared for college study. Considering that only about half of students who enroll in college actually earn a degree or certificate, we must find ways to confront this problem. Research shows that most future job opportunities in the U.S. will require some level of college study or career training after high school.

A handful of states have taken action toward improving college readiness — notably Arkansas, California, Indiana, Georgia, Kentucky and Texas, all of which have at least established specific state policy agendas for dealing with the problem.

Achieve Inc. has worked with many states through its [American Diploma Project](#) to promote the importance and help states take some early steps toward improving college readiness. The [American Council on Education](#) and the State Higher Education Executive Officers also are among the groups that have begun supporting the need to take action on readiness.

Most states, though, have neither committed to a specific agenda for improving college readiness nor made significant progress.

The lack of progress is particularly worrisome because many in postsecondary education agree that improving college readiness is doable, and we have a good idea of the practical steps our states and K-12 and postsecondary education systems need to take.

Briefly, these steps are needed:

- Establish college-readiness standards in language arts and mathematics that are embraced by all of postsecondary education.
- Ensure adoption of the college-readiness standards by the public K-12 schools.
- Identify high school tests that measure students' performance on the standards early in high school so they can find the extra help or courses they need before or during the senior year.
- Make these tests part of the state's K-12 school accountability system.
- Prepare current and new teachers in the new standards and how to incorporate them into classroom instruction.

So, if we know how to address this college-readiness challenge, why is there such little progress across many of our states and systems of postsecondary education?

As we have reviewed state policies on college readiness in the past year, a time during which many states should have been making considerable progress on readiness, we've seen a lack of shared views within and across states of the magnitude and nature of the readiness problems we face. There is simply not the critical convergence of thinking around various elements of the readiness challenge that is necessary for all interests to establish or commit to a bold action agenda.

I remember attending a graduate school forum some years ago and hearing the noted organizational psychologist Karl E. Weick, now a professor at the University of Michigan, refer to higher education as a bunch of solutions in search of relevant problems. In other words, frequently the most difficult task is defining the problem clearly and in such ways that all of the key parties embrace the definition. The solutions are more apparent when the definition is clarified.

Here are some suggestions about how to bring consensus on some of the key points in defining the readiness challenge:

First, there needs to be agreement that all states face a significant readiness problem. Research shows that most students are not well-prepared to begin college study in language arts, mathematics or both. Even many students who are not required to take remedial courses are not well-prepared for college work, and many professors and college administrators know it.

Few states apply one set of readiness standards across all of postsecondary education, resulting in individual campuses or systems setting their own readiness or placement standards. Frequently, the standards are lower than they should be to indicate readiness. States that recognize the magnitude of the readiness problem are more likely to make readiness a priority and move toward improvement.

Second, postsecondary education needs to embrace the improvement of college readiness as a move in its own best interest — and in the best interest of every state and the entire nation. Some officials in postsecondary education will question this statement. After all, remedial education still generates per-student funding, and many students who are not ready for college still make their way into degree-credit courses and generate funding, at least until they drop out. Their lack of readiness also provides an easy explanation for low college graduation rates. Having high proportions of students better prepared for college would eliminate a reason higher education currently uses to explain the low rates and would make higher education more accountable for its own effectiveness. Thus, making postsecondary education more accountable for postsecondary

completion while maintaining access would force us to take readiness more seriously, because readiness is a key factor in degree and certificate completion.

Third, postsecondary education must not confuse the need to improve readiness with a threat to college admission or entry. Confusing readiness with admission will only keep states and postsecondary education systems from reaching consensus on making readiness a priority. Broad-access and open-door institutions (which serve a large majority of students across the nation) will not fully embrace a readiness initiative if they believe it will negatively affect access. Therefore, states need to assert that access and entry will be maintained regardless of the readiness agenda. Remedial education will continue — only, we hope, a lot less of it, for more students will be prepared to begin college work.

This is the fourth and most essential point: Improving college readiness depends on strengthening high school graduation requirements and diplomas, but states and higher education systems cannot delay dealing with the readiness problem until these graduation requirements rise to meet college-readiness standards. All states need to raise high school graduation and diploma requirements, increase high school graduation rates, improve student achievement, and ensure that much higher proportions of students are ready for college upon completing high school. All of these areas need careful and diligent work from K-12 and postsecondary leaders working together. Rhetoric calling for high school diploma and graduation requirements and high-stakes graduation tests to be changed overnight to ensure college readiness for all students in the near-term may cause the public schools to question whether higher graduation requirements are realistic. Many states already struggle with low graduation rates in high schools, even under existing requirements and tests.

Fifth and related to the last point, for the readiness initiative to be taken seriously, the general claims that “all students need to be ready for college and careers” needs to be narrowed down, clarified and embraced widely. We must specify what readiness means in those essential skills that every person needs to learn further in school and at work — reading, writing and math. Specified in terms of these learning skills, a case can be made that all high school graduates need these skills in collegiate academic programs, postsecondary career-preparation programs, or subsequent on-the-job training. In today’s economy, all students need a certain level of basic skills to pursue their goals.

Sixth, postsecondary education and the public schools need to recognize that meeting the college-readiness challenge will center on setting specific, measurable performance standards in key learning skills and having more students achieve them. There is still some confusion over this focus, especially in postsecondary education, which has little experience in performance standards-based education (in contrast to public schools since the 1990s). Postsecondary education tends to see readiness as synonymous with high school courses and grades or with ACT or SAT scores. While rigorous high school courses and good grades are necessary, they do not by any means ensure readiness. The national admissions tests may come closer to indicating student readiness in reading, writing and math, but they do not provide the precise and transparent focus on the core standards that high school teachers need to use in their classroom instruction.

Seventh, the best kind of readiness agenda will require a statewide effort that has all of postsecondary education acting as a body, agreeing on one set of readiness standards and uniformly communicating them to all high schools in a state. This statewide stance is needed to ensure that teachers in all of a state’s high schools know exactly what standards to help students meet. No state has managed yet to get all of postsecondary education — universities and

community colleges — to speak with one voice. College readiness will be improved only when high school classroom teachers receive clear and concise signals about standards, backed by all of postsecondary education in their state. Statewide, state-level policy direction may be needed to provide the framework for public schools and postsecondary education to coordinate their efforts.

Reaching consensus across postsecondary education on the definition of the nation's college-readiness problem will help states and college systems move toward solutions. All states need explicit readiness standards in reading and math, and they need to bring postsecondary education and K-12 schools together to develop such standards and to implement them. Getting more students ready for college and the work place will benefit our nation, every state, all students and postsecondary education.

Dave Spence is the president of the Southern Regional Education Board, a nonprofit and nonpartisan organization based in Atlanta that works with 16 member states to improve pre-K-12 and postsecondary education. He is a former vice chancellor of the California, Florida and Georgia state university systems, and he received the Virginia B. Smith Innovative Leadership Award in 2006 from the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education.