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## Use the Common Core. Use It Widely. Use It Well.



Michael Morgenstern for The Chronicle

By William E. (Brit) Kirwan, Timothy P. White, and Nancy Zimpher

**M**any of us in higher education have observed an increasing number of students arriving at our doorstep not fully prepared to pursue a college degree. This is our collective problem as a nation. Our country, and our local communities, can ill afford to turn our backs on these prospective students and their families. Consequently, higher education has invested billions of public dollars every year in so-called remedial education to prepare students for basic mathematics and writing.

This is not sustainable. There has to be a better way.

Fortunately, there's a solution that most states and many others are pursuing: the Common Core State Standards. This effort holds tremendous promise, but it has recently become the subject of a great deal of misinformation and misunderstanding. To show our support for Common Core, the three of us are joining more than 200 other postsecondary leaders across the country to start a coalition called Higher Ed for Higher Standards. We invite our fellow university chancellors, college presidents, and others in academia to learn more about these standards and to join us in this effort to preserve them.

The Common Core was developed in 2009 through a collective effort by educators and others across the country. The concept was simple: Start with our expectations for incoming students—the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in first-year college courses and job-training programs—and back down through the grades so that students who meet standards in elementary, middle, and high school will be college- and career-ready when they reach our campuses. Forty-five states voluntarily adopted these benchmarks in mathematics, writing, and literacy.

Most faculty members who have been involved with the Common Core give the standards very high marks. They are significantly stronger than states' previous K-12 standards, with a heavier emphasis on the skills in critical thinking, quantitative reasoning, writing, and research that we value so much in higher education. The business community shares that view: Both the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the Business Roundtable have come out strongly in favor of Common Core because of the promise it holds for strengthening economic competitiveness.

Elementary- and secondary-school teachers are also supportive. Over three-quarters of teachers think the standards reflect the right expectations and will challenge them to improve their instruction in ways that will benefit their students.

Sadly, despite the strong support from educators and business, the standards have become a lightning rod in state legislatures across the nation. Critics on the right argue the federal government has forced these new standards on the states; critics on the left contend that the standards are being put in place too quickly.

The reality? Neither claim is true. The standards were developed by teachers, college faculty members, employers, and others at the request of governors and state education commissioners. The federal government wasn't involved in the development at all.

And when it comes to implementation, most states rolled out the standards two to three years before new assessments would be given to measure student learning. So while there is a legitimate debate to be had about how quickly to attach consequences to the assessments, it's not accurate to say they have been put into effect too fast, and it's not fair to slow the process when children's futures are at stake.

As university leaders, we cannot sit by and watch an important reform with the promise to dramatically improve college readiness get stopped in its tracks because of political jockeying. It's time that we in higher education make our voices heard.

Think about what's at stake. Nationwide, 50 percent of students entering two-year colleges and 20 percent of those who enroll in four-year institutions need to take remedial courses. To make matters worse, of these students, only 17 percent will ever complete degrees or certificates. Those statistics are deeply troubling to all of us. While our systems are working hard to re-engineer their remedial approaches, with some measure of success, there is no possibility of matching the results that will be achieved by having students who enter our institutions ready for college.

This is also an economic issue: Colleges spend \$7-billion a year on remedial courses for their students, while the students spend an estimated \$3-billion or more annually to take those courses. Imagine what we could do with those resources if students arrived on campuses better prepared.

When elementary and secondary schools use the Common Core standards well, it will help close the preparation gap and set students on the path to prosperity.

But the standards themselves are not enough. States must also develop new assessments capable of measuring the standards. Otherwise, teachers and parents won't have the information they need to support student learning, and we at the postsecondary level won't have meaningful information about student readiness for college-level work. The truth is, most states' current high-school tests are not rigorous enough to provide us this information, and so we in higher education often ignore them.

The efforts under way by two consortia of states to build new assessments aligned with the Common Core have great potential. Our states are involved in these consortia—the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium—and faculty members from our institutions have been helping to shape the tests that students will take in high school.

But here again, politics threatens to undo this important work. In some parts of the country, legislators are considering pulling their states out of these new assessments. States that go back to the old tests or take shortcuts in developing new ones will be throwing away a once-in-a-generation opportunity to improve a deficient system and create a more meaningful, coordinated one.

It's time for all of us in higher education to refocus this conversation on where it should have been all along: improving the preparation of students for the world that awaits them after high school. If we don't, states risk losing years of excellent work by thousands of educators and setting back student progress for

the foreseeable future, which will further jeopardize the country's competitive position in the world economy.

William E. (Brit) Kirwan is chancellor of the University System of Maryland; Timothy P. White is chancellor of the California State University system; and Nancy Zimpher is chancellor of the State University of New York system.