

THE COLLEGE BOARD **ADVOCACY & POLICY CENTER**

# **AFFINITY NETWORK**

SUPPORTING COLLABORATION  
BETWEEN K–12 AND HIGHER  
EDUCATION

FINAL REPORT

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**The College Board Advocacy & Policy Center** extends its deep gratitude and admiration to the members of the state teams who showed such strong dedication to this effort. The Center also wishes to acknowledge the useful and informative contributions of the Affinity Network Advisory Committee.

## INTRODUCTION

The nation is focused as never before on education attainment and college completion. Numerous reports bemoan flat scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the high proportion of students who transition to college only to find themselves in remedial classes, and low college graduation rates. While there are some recent bright spots in the data, particularly the upward movement in high school graduation statistics and rising college enrollment among Hispanics, strong concerns remain about students' preparation for postsecondary education, along with persistence and completion.

It has long been recognized that these problems are exacerbated, if not partly caused, by the long-standing divide — in terms of structure, policy and oversight, funding, and so on — between our secondary and postsecondary sectors. While this division may have been practical when most of the population was not expected to continue formal study past high school, it is adverse in a society where some postsecondary education is necessary in order to obtain family-supporting employment. To propel students successfully from one level to the next, we need a true *system* of education. A system requires coordination not only at the upper administrative levels but also at the district and institutional levels so that curricula and instruction are aligned and responsibility shared for college preparation and completion. Importantly, this cannot be done without similarly harmonizing professional learning.

Hence, the Affinity Network was conceived and sponsored by the College Board Advocacy & Policy Center to facilitate students' successful transition from high school to college by:

- Helping educators across the K–12 and postsecondary sectors understand and agree on common expectations for our nation's students;
- Serving as an incubator for ideas and solutions for College Board members and for the education field at the institutional, state, and national levels; and
- Establishing an ongoing process to encourage creative problem solving, coordinated action, and stronger links between education sectors.

While initiatives to improve the school-to-college transition are increasingly common,<sup>1</sup> the Affinity Network was unique in several ways. For one, the guiding assumption was that solving the problem of students' transition cannot be done without cross-sector administrator and faculty engagement. If students are to successfully bridge the high school–college divide, faculty must do so as well. Thus, a starting point of the work was transcending sector barriers so as to establish trust and relationships that would allow for productive collaboration.

In addition, the approach was a regional one. In early 2012, teams of secondary and postsecondary educators who committed to working with one another were drawn from College Board member institutions in five states — Georgia, Indiana, Maryland, Oklahoma, and Washington. The participating institutions included secondary districts and the two- and four-year colleges and universities that enroll the districts' graduates and in several cases train their teachers as well. Thus, the institutions and professionals came from within the same regions and comprised local networks that share a commitment to serving the same students.

Finally, the initiative emphasized collaborative professional learning. This strategy addressed the problem of poor student preparation and transitions at the discipline level, supporting teachers as they were coached in directing their own process of learning to inform better instruction. Within a guiding framework, state teams could determine their particular focuses in response to local considerations and interests.

The Affinity Network's cross-sector, regional, and instruction-centered approach to the challenge of poor student preparation and transitions resulted in new relationships, new understanding, new practices, and new teaching tools. Below, we provide details on the process, some of the barriers, and the outcomes. After a year of collaboration, the participants are well on their way to improved cross-sector communication and modes of systematic inquiry that are improving practice and should ultimately impact student achievement.

## A FOCUS ON THE COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

The new Common Core State Standards are viewed by many education leaders as one solution to the problem of misaligned high school and college performance expectations resulting in underpreparation and poor student transitions. The standards, conceived by a national coalition of governors and chief state school officers, define the knowledge and skills students must attain to graduate from high school ready to succeed in entry-level college course work. Forty-five states and the District of Columbia have adopted the standards and will use associated assessments that are in development; thus, for the first time there is substantial agreement across the nation on the English language arts and mathematics skills and knowledge students need to master to progress successfully from grade to grade and enter college.

With most K–12 districts currently knee-deep in Common Core implementation, the Affinity Network aimed to enhance, rather than distract from, these efforts. Thus, the implications of Common Core adoption for students' college preparation and transition was chosen as the primary focus for the work of the Affinity Network. These general questions were posed to the teams: How might the Common Core State Standards affect the alignment of high school exit expectations with postsecondary entrance expectations? What is needed to achieve stronger alignment?

Research such as the National Curriculum Survey produced every few years by ACT has repeatedly shown that high school teachers feel that their graduating students are more prepared for college than do higher education faculty.<sup>2</sup> Hence, the development of the new standards rightly included strong contributions from the postsecondary sector. Yet there is little awareness of the standards among the broad population of higher education administrators and faculty.<sup>3</sup> As Affinity Network advisory committee members Nancy Shapiro and Zakiya Lee from the University System of Maryland write:

***We are now approaching a critical juncture — as important as it was to have higher education faculty and researchers at the table in the formulation of the standards, it is just as important to have them at the table as the Common Core State Standards arrive on the doorsteps of public schools across the nation.***<sup>4</sup>

The Affinity Network provided an important opportunity for improved cross-sector understanding of the changes in content and instruction that the new standards require. The Network also provided facilitated support for deep examination of the ways that cross-sector alignment will be impacted, as well as the kinds of adjustments to current programs and practices that are needed to realize the promise of the Common Core.

## A COLLABORATIVE PROCESS OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

According to a recent survey sponsored by the American Federation of Teachers, most K–12 teachers have received training on the Common Core.<sup>5</sup> But 31 percent of those surveyed said they received training that was “inadequate.” One commentator has critiqued Common Core professional learning as resting too heavily on traditional models that use terms such as delivery, training, activity, and development.<sup>6</sup> These words connote a process in which information is imparted in a single time-bound experience to one individual. In general, education researchers have long criticized existing professional development, with one expert saying that it “is still characterized by one-shot workshops, rather than more effective problem-based approaches built into teachers’ ongoing work with their colleagues.”<sup>7,8</sup>

In higher education, intensive professional development that is focused on instructional methods is relatively rare. College faculty members are disciplinary experts who commonly have little or no formal pedagogical training and limited access to forums for discussing teaching practices with colleagues.<sup>9</sup> Even rarer is professional development that crosses the education divide — bringing secondary and postsecondary educators together as peers to share expert knowledge.<sup>10</sup> With few exceptions, the Affinity Network participants had never before had opportunities to jointly explore with their counterparts at other education levels the alignment of curriculum, effective instructional approaches, performance expectations exemplified by student work samples, and strategies to help students transition from the high school classroom to the college classroom.

Thus, the College Board’s strategy was to facilitate professional learning — a carefully structured, explicitly collaborative process of inquiry to better understand how to improve achievement for students.<sup>11</sup> Cross-sector professional learning teams were formed among the participants from each of the states. Teams were charged to work together over the course of an academic year, sharing areas of expertise, examining data to answer their questions, and identifying areas where they could most productively implement solutions. The teams were purposely organized by discipline — math and English language arts (ELA) — and included high school, community college, and four-year college faculty (in all but one case). In addition, an administrative team was formed in each region to share and examine relevant policies and to provide support to the instructors. The fact that team members were all located in the same region and concerned with the same students made the work not only concrete but also compelling and relevant to their particular conditions and needs.

To promote cross-sector professional learning, the Affinity Network followed a distinct process: Participants were convened, challenged, supported, stimulated, and incentivized. The teams came together several times, with facilitation and analytic tools provided by College Board staff. They were challenged to generally concentrate on the Common Core State Standards and how full standards adoption will affect alignment across their institutions, but beyond this common point of departure, the teams devised their own particular focuses. Participants’ thinking and exploration were stimulated by relevant written briefs and blogs contributed by

content experts. An online community facilitated the exchange of ideas. Stipends were provided to allow participants to carve out time for the work. Over time, intrinsic incentives emerged as the individuals increasingly understood how these professional partnerships made it possible to address shared concerns, identify cooperative solutions and, in so doing, realize their common mission.

Since most of the higher education participants were unfamiliar with the Common Core State Standards, much of the initial meeting time was spent in close examination of the standards. The College Board facilitator then prompted the teams to jointly agree on a particular standards-connected question or problem to address, to develop a scope of work to answer these questions, and to define a set of work products to be completed within a specified time frame. As one participant said, "We started out talking about the Common Core, then decided it wasn't about Common Core anymore, it was about 'how do we work together.'" Another participant said similarly, "We talked a lot, and then we talked some more. Our focus was on what 'college ready' really means for our institutions and how to foster knowledge transfer from high school to college." While this process went more quickly for some teams than for others, all eventually landed on a specific area of inquiry.

The English language arts teams in all five states decided to concentrate on the teaching of composition. The teams came to their decisions independently, but they reflect a common awareness that too many entering college students are placed into remedial writing courses. Strong writing skills are needed in college but are all too often neglected in high school, in part because tests used for accountability purposes usually contain little writing.

The participating practitioners understood that the Common Core demands changes in writing instruction, with far greater emphasis being placed on writing analytic as opposed to personal and reflective essays. As the teams continued to meet, they examined student writing samples, assessment rubrics, and other course materials that served as a basis for their discussions. They shared the teaching practices they use to help students locate, evaluate, and cite sources; identify audiences for written work; and draft and edit essays that synthesize material to inform or argue a point of view.

The teams were also strongly interested in how to provide effective feedback to students on their writing. Teachers find it difficult to find sufficient time to review and comment on large numbers of lengthy essays. The teams examined sample rubrics and sample assignments that included instructor comments, with some then developing assignment templates for a school-to-college "bridge" essay.

The math teams all chose to focus generally on the teaching of the major concepts of college algebra. While there is currently some national discussion as to the necessity of college algebra for success in most postsecondary (and career) fields, the Common Core emphasizes mastery of algebra as an indicator of college readiness. Yet, there is little consensus in terms of the content of first-year college algebra courses. The participating practitioners recognized that there were gaps in their knowledge in terms of whether their current high school math course progressions aligned with Common Core content and sequences; whether the various existing college-preparatory algebra courses covered similar content; and whether students who pass high school algebra courses are well-prepared for college algebra.

Thus, all teams began their analysis by examining syllabi, assignments, and examinations across college-preparatory and entry-level college algebra courses to assess alignment and comparability. They examined the concepts covered, depth of coverage, and how understanding and mastery are assessed. They then looked for evidence of student transition and success, and where they found such data lacking, made plans to collect evidence. A subset of the teams went

further in looking at specific math skill areas and how secondary and postsecondary teaching practices for those areas were similar or different. Some explored quantitative reasoning skills and how those are taught in high school capstone and introductory college courses.

These efforts took time and in some cases involved false starts and digressions. There are multiple barriers to cross-sector professional collaboration, and in the next section we briefly review some of those that were confronted and overcome.

## CHALLENGES TO CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATIVE WORK

The goals and process of the Affinity Network were purposely designed to promote mutual learning among participants and to challenge existing norms and develop new practices in support of cross-sector work. Although a few participants had experience teaching in both schools and college settings, discussions of curriculum and instruction with counterparts across the education divide were quite new for the majority. And, as indicated above, in contrast to traditional modes of professional development, the Affinity Network asked faculty to work together in new ways. While the College Board provided guidance in the development of scopes of work and work products, facilitation and technical assistance, subject matter expertise and other supports, the success of this effort depended upon the willingness of education professionals to move beyond merely framing problems to agreement on solutions and devising plans for their implementation. It is then not unexpected that several challenges arose, often related to participants' preconceptions about one another's institutions or disciplines.

### Overcoming Reform Fatigue

One of the first barriers to address was reform fatigue. With so many state, national, or campus-based education reform initiatives in play, this challenge was quite real. (In fact, some institutions initially passed on the opportunity to participate in the Affinity Network, perceiving their faculty at a point of reform overload.) While the institutions that joined the Network had the support of top leadership, some of the educators tapped to be closely involved were at first unsure of how participation might integrate with and add value to existing work. At the outset, several members expressed skepticism and concern that the Network might turn out to be one of many demands on their time and too far removed from the classroom.

The case of the Maryland community college team provides a good illustration. At Prince George's Community College, the practitioners who were asked to participate by their administrators said they were intrigued but hesitant to agree because of their existing workload. The math department in particular was consumed with an ambitious redesign of the developmental course sequence. But, over the first few months of the initiative, the faculty began to see that the Affinity Network was helpful "in building bridges with the high schools," as one participant said, in order to share information about the redesign. In addition, the instructors were eager for the learning experience of getting into one another's classrooms (see sidebar for more details). In general, since the Affinity Network's approach allowed the teams to develop their own work plans, they were able to think about how the initiative connected to others on their campuses.

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#### The Desire to Examine Instruction: The Maryland Team

When defining a scope of work to address the Affinity Network questions, members of the Maryland team were especially interested in exploring different approaches to teaching and learning at the high

school and college levels. The overarching goal was to identify similarities and differences in course expectations, and how well aligned expectations are at the three levels. Their chosen approach was unique: Triads of instructors — one each from the senior high school, college developmental, and college credit levels — observed one another’s classes and examined accompanying course materials, including syllabi, lesson plans, and assignments. Faculty looked specifically at work related to Common Core anchor standards, including analytical essay writing in English and problem-solving strategies in math. The triads gathered descriptive information, which they analyzed to identify specific behaviors that equip students to succeed as they move from one level to the next. One participant expressed this as an important component of “backmapping” curriculum and instruction: “If we’re expecting X in English 101, what do we need to do in ninth, 10th, 11th, and 12th grades?”

The entire team met three times to establish a common methodology, including a set of guiding questions and a common reporting template. They determined that they should examine, at each level, how students are engaged in the content; what students are expected to know and do; and how students demonstrate what they know and can do. After completing the classroom visits, the participants met three times more to examine course artifacts in relation to the observations, summarize their findings, make recommendations, and establish next steps. This was not a simple process, as there were many bureaucratic barriers, but the college and district leadership actively supported these efforts with release time and stipends.

### **Understanding the Different Cultures**

The participants learned a great deal about the differences in the secondary versus postsecondary classrooms. College faculty were surprised at how large the high school classes were, and how frequently they were interrupted by announcements and other distractions. The high school teachers expressed surprise at the use of technology in the college classrooms and at how, with the help of technology, class time could be used flexibly according to the students’ needs. They also learned that assessments in college math are given outside of class time in testing centers, leaving more in-class time for instruction.

### **Understanding Differences in Instruction and Expectations of Students**

As the participants observed and discussed differences in the courses and classroom environments, they agreed that the high schools should better emulate the college environment, in terms of promoting greater student responsibility and independent learning. As one participant noted, “We’re not structuring high school to produce self-directed students.” In high school, teachers see students daily, so students can rely on teachers to sustain the learning. In contrast, in college, instructors see students usually twice a week, so the students must reinforce the learning themselves between classes. This is something they must be taught to do.

In college, students are expected to independently seek help when necessary. Hence, it’s important that high school students see supplemental support or enrichment activities as beneficial. Teachers can help students understand the value of using the resources that colleges offer, such as writing and math labs, faculty office hours, and so on.

Another area of discussion, particularly among math faculty, was how to determine whether students have mastered course content versus merely passing. College faculty shared the concern that students are often allowed to continue along course sequences with significant gaps in their understanding of foundational concepts. High school grades often depend more on homework and class work than on assessments to show mastery, while the reverse is usually true in college. Participating high school teachers noted the pressure to keep moving through the curriculum, observing that the curriculum requires a faster pace than is good for most students.

One way to help students achieve greater mastery of key concepts and skills is to achieve better consistency horizontally across one grade or content level. As one participant asked, “What is passing? What goes into a passing grade?” This is particularly challenging in writing, which is not emphasized sufficiently at the high school level and not assessed consistently (in large part, participants bemoaned, because achievement in writing is not included in state or national accountability measures). High school teachers lamented that they do not have the time to grade essays from the hundred-plus students they might have across multiple courses, much less consider whether their students are falling short in similar or different areas so as to inform their instruction.

### Understanding the Need for Data and for Further Collaboration

Lack of data was recognized as a barrier to better alignment of courses at the different levels. The district has yet to follow a cohort of graduates to examine how they progress once in college; the college is just beginning an effort to collect high school identification numbers from incoming students in order to track students longitudinally. Participants emphasized the need to understand course-taking and course performance patterns in order to understand how students perform in subsequent courses based on earlier performance.

In sum, the Maryland team came to realize the need for continued mutual understanding so that high school teachers would know what college-level work and student behaviors look like, so that instruction can be scaffolded toward those ideals. Participants wish to organize more professional learning opportunities for other teachers to include classroom observations and joint exploration of teaching strategies. As a high school teacher said, “We need to build collegiality in order to build the future.”

### Moving Away from Blame to Shared Responsibility

In order to be able to work collaboratively to address students’ preparedness, team members had to adopt a systems view of common goals and collective responsibility for those goals. Yet, convening secondary and postsecondary educators to tackle the problem of poor student transitions runs the risk of creating a setting for fault finding and defensiveness. To avoid such a scenario, the Affinity Network provided a constructive environment, maintaining a strong focus on meeting the needs of the different regions’ students and advancing a shared college readiness agenda.

As one advisory committee member observed, the opportunity to examine the Common Core materials face to face was important to building trust and developing a common language. So, too, was the emphasis placed on examining evidence throughout the process, including student work samples. In her words, “Strategies like these allowed team members to put an end to the blame game and experience a different kind of accountability.” It also meant that people were willing to take the “long view” because they understood, as she explained, “you really are in it together and really must coordinate to make a meaningful impact.”

A Washington State university professor shared that he was initially interested in being involved because he recognized that he and his colleagues knew a lot less about “what goes on in high school” than they should. “People at the college certainly do speak negatively about the unpreparedness of incoming students” and “make a lot of generalizations about the deficiencies students come in with, but don’t have a lot of knowledge.” He saw the Network as a good opportunity to gain greater understanding of high school courses and instruction.

At the end of the year, many participants recognized that establishing rapport and feeling connected to common goals for their regions was a necessary first step to their important work, particularly work that necessitates taking shared ownership of poor student achievement results.

As an Oklahoma participant said, “It’s all about relationships, since we don’t trust strangers. So for some it took time to get to know one another and trust one another.” Several participants made comments to the effect that blaming a stranger for a problem is easier than blaming a friend.

### Transcending Cultural Barriers

While the Affinity Network aimed to breach sectoral and institutional barriers, the initiative also brought distinct professional groups together to work in new ways. Trust was built across different levels and divides — among instructors and among administrators; between administrators and instructors; and between faculty of different disciplines.

As one community college administrator shared, “One of the benefits of this process was building the level of trust between the administration of the three different levels. What has happened as a result of this dialogue is that as we talk about remediation and how we address remediation, it has opened up a more intense review of what has actually been successful. ... The Affinity Network has created the trust to be able to have those conversations so that, hopefully, we can improve the remediation problem.”

As noted above, one way to facilitate such conversations was to encourage a culture of evidence based on an objective examination of data. The prior experience of some participants was that the increasing national focus on measuring student outcomes and evidence-based practice only contributed to negative finger-pointing. As a Maryland community college administrator stated, “The data exists, but what you choose to do with it depends on the relationships, the rapport, the trust ... looking at the data together, or looking just at my piece, separately from everybody else.” The Affinity Network demonstrated for him that “We can look at those outcomes, however they are, and with this connection between the different levels we can look at it in a positive way and ask, ‘How can we, collectively, make a change?’”

As the year proceeded and relationships developed, participants came to increasingly recognize the talents of their colleagues — both existing in-district or campus colleagues and new ones. Speaking broadly, a community college dean commented that, “The other thing that I think was really important was recognizing that we have a wealth of resources within our sectors, and we should leverage that.” In some cases administrators gained a greater respect for the instructors in their own institutions, as they saw that they could lead their own professional learning. As a school principal said, “A real learning point for me was to shut up and let them do their jobs. It’s working because you’re letting these professionals work together.”

Eventually, even the barriers between the disciplines came down. The Washington State team in particular felt it was important to look at points of intersection between the new English language arts and the math standards. They also sought to look at how the standards might influence teaching and learning across the curriculum (see sidebar). If the standards will require new and more effective teaching approaches, then should not practitioners in all the different disciplines be involved in the conversation?

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### Promoting Broad Ownership of the Common Core: The Washington State Team

The Washington State team, like the others, began by examining curriculum alignment: studying the standards and then explicating math clusters or writing anchor standards where notable shifts in curriculum and instruction would be required as part of the standards adoption. However, they also spent time considering the standards as a whole and their implications for fields outside of English and mathematics. After all, they posited, for the promise of these new standards to be realized, a much broader base of educators will need to be mobilized.

For example, the teams felt it was important to work on strategies to engage teachers and faculty in fields outside of English with the aim of adopting a consistent set of cross-institution practices around the teaching of writing. There was consensus that to make a significant improvement in student writing capabilities, all disciplines need to be involved as advocates for better writing.

The team set aside time to investigate how both sets of standards — specifically the English Language Arts/Literacy anchor standards and Standards for Mathematical Practice — related to each other. To illustrate their conclusions, team members from math and ELA fields worked together on examples of integrative assignments that could give students more opportunities to apply the reasoning, problem-solving, and communication skills emphasized within both standard strands. The team also began a conversation about the importance of learning communities and other initiatives to help students form clearer connections between classes.

Interestingly, the team concluded that advocacy efforts to advance the standards should not champion the importance of either math (typically in the context of STEM) or literacy, but rather should place equal importance on both sets of standards in shaping the region’s future. To that end, members of the team developed a new acronym, SWIRL, which denotes speaking, writing, information literacy, reading, and listening. As one participant explained, “One of the things we’re struggling to find is language to distinguish the ‘across-all-disciplines’ literacy responsibilities from the ‘things that English teachers do’ as a unique discipline. If we can begin to talk about this quintet of things [SWIRL] as a noun [like STEM], we can then refer to it as an area that all teachers need to foster, and make progress in the development of each one of the five vital communication domains.” Thus, named in this manner, the group agreed that it would be easier to speak explicitly about the need for SWIRL and STEM instruction in all classes and at all levels.

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Finally, the College Board staff anticipated that sustaining momentum for this work among busy professionals in a compressed timeline would be a significant challenge. While certainly more time would have been useful, we did not find that, on the whole, participants’ attention or commitment faded as the school year progressed. On the contrary; as one person said: “The more we met, the more we felt like this was important enough to do. ... By the third meeting, we were looking forward to keeping this going.” It was clear that these professionals were deriving satisfaction from sharing their expertise and identifying solutions to improve their practice.

## SUMMING IT UP: EXCHANGING SOLUTIONS, OUTLINING NEXT STEPS, SUSTAINING COLLABORATION

In early April 2013, all of the Affinity Network participants gathered in Fort Worth, Texas, for a capstone convening. More than 100 state team and College Board staff members came together both to reflect on the Affinity Network process and to share their accomplishments over the past year. It was an upbeat, celebratory event.

Through the Affinity Network, participants learned and practiced a particular approach to professional learning aimed at improving student outcomes. There was strong enthusiasm for all aspects of the Network — facilitation that allowed groups to set their own focus but then not wander too far from that focus; cross-sector relationship-building that meant “the end of the blame game”; an emphasis on examining the alignment of standards and content from high school to college; and collaborative work to improve instructional practices. Participants said they were ending the year feeling invigorated and encouraged about making a difference for their students.

Below, we provide some illustrations of the professional learning that took place. We also describe tools and products developed by the teams. Finally, we conclude with information on the next steps for these efforts.

### Content-Focused Learning

As noted previously, the main focus of the disciplinary teams was alignment — how to better ensure that high school lessons and instructional strategies will prepare students well for college-level learning. Affinity Network participants approached this in several different ways. As illustrations, we share below the work of the Indiana English language arts team, which examined how students are taught to appropriately use sources in their writing; the Georgia math team, which mapped mathematics course progressions and began an analysis of alignment among them; and the Washington English language arts team, which explored differences in writing prompts and writing feedback at the high school and college levels.

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#### **The Indiana Team: How do Common Core State Standards for writing connect with current K–12 practice and college entrance expectations for first-year composition, with a focus on writing with sources?**

The effective and honest use of sources is essential for student success in college-level writing and beyond. The Common Core emphasizes the need for schools to provide students with far more practice in reading and writing about informational text. To do this, students must develop a firm grounding in source use. Web and other technology that make information widely available in many forms beyond published texts raise the stakes and pose new challenges in what students must understand in order to cite sources appropriately. Yet, source use can be difficult to teach. And, the current emphasis on self-expressive writing at the high school level can push source use to the margins.

To be successful in first-year composition, students need to develop an understanding of the principles of source use, rather than just proper citation formatting. This includes teaching the skills associated with appropriately quoting, summarizing, and paraphrasing materials in high school, as well as in using research to answer questions and make arguments.

Through analysis of middle and high school course materials, including sample assignments and graded papers, the Indiana team found that the district’s students receive extensive instruction in how to find and evaluate sources. However, they concluded that students need significantly more experience learning the principles of source use. Hence, the challenge for the team: working together on the redesign of curricula to instruct students on the basic principles of source use. The team’s initial recommendations, based on this analysis, and next steps are as follows:

1. Teach principles of source use earlier and more consistently in English language arts and across the curriculum. Create scaffolded assignments:
  - Begin with research assignments of limited scope, where the teacher provides the sources.
  - Teach paraphrasing techniques as soon as students are writing book reports.
  - Help students to understand early on not just how to cite, quote, or paraphrase, but also why to cite.
2. Revise assignments in middle and high school grades and provide additional writing supports.
  - Shift the emphasis toward argumentation; ask students to think and formulate an argument about a topic, rather than just “to write a report.”
  - By the high school level, ask students to use more sophisticated and varied sources.
  - Ensure that students and teachers have access to scholarly databases.
  - Share and discuss college and university first-year composition resources, including published guidelines for writing with sources.

### The Georgia Team: Math Pathways Analysis

Georgia’s math team included a strong combination of district, community college and university math instructors, and curriculum coordinators and math educators, who greatly respected one another and shared an obvious passion for the teaching of math. As part of the process of reaching agreement on a math focus area and guiding questions, this team determined that they should first document all of the high-school-to-college math pathways a student might follow and need to complete to meet prerequisites for given degree programs. The team identified no less than a half-dozen course sequences, making note of the various assessments students were also required to pass in order to continue along each one.

On the basis of this pathways analysis, the group concluded that as a starting point, they should first closely examine precalculus. Is there good evidence to show that students who meet the Common Core Algebra II math standards and go on to enroll in and pass high school precalculus are equipped with the knowledge and skills for college-level algebra? Following an in-depth examination of course materials at all three levels and the placement tests required by Georgia Perimeter College and the University of Georgia, it was determined that Gwinnett County Public Schools students who receive passing grades in precalculus are prepared to meet the rigor of college-level math work.

In the process of examining the new standards, current placement tests, and course artifacts, it also became abundantly clear that while the team had learned a great deal, it had merely scratched the surface. The proposed next steps are:

1. Apply the same analysis to statistics (since many students do not take calculus).
2. Conduct classroom visits to expand the examination to instruction, along with course materials and assessments, to gain a fuller picture of the performance expectations and approaches to teaching and learning at all three levels.
3. Examine the purpose of math placement tests at the collegiate level. If upper-level math course grades can be validated as predicting success in college-level math, are placement tests necessary for all students?
4. Determine what alternative assessments, if any, could be given to students who have shown proficiency at the secondary level as a way to ensure that students are not being asked to repeat equivalent courses in college.
5. Consider additional course offerings at the collegiate level for nonmath majors as well as the integration of math instruction into STEM courses, including courses in engineering and design.
6. Deepen the understanding of students’ educational experience prior to their collegiate experience and study how this affects their attitudes, expectations, and performance in college. Collegiate instruction should be adjusted to both support and challenge students who have been prepared under the new Common Core Standards.

### The Washington Team: Aligning Writing Instruction and Feedback to Students:

The Washington State English language arts team chose to analyze high school and college writing assignments as well as feedback to students on their writing to better understand how students’ skills are developed for and through college-level writing. The team’s investigation exposed gaps between high school and college expectations. As one individual described the team’s findings, high school writing prompts were quite prescriptive, giving students step-by-step instructions, which was problematic to the college professors. A student coming from this experience will say, “Just tell me what to do.” But college professors will respond, “No. We’re going to give you some guidelines, and you need to make some decisions yourself.” In addition, high school writing feedback tended to be focused on the mechanics of writing rather than on the theme or argument, which is emphasized more at the college level. Informed by a literature review on strategies for providing students with feedback and for fostering improvement

with the help of this feedback, the group agreed to apply their findings, with the aim of collaboratively documenting some best practices for high school and college teachers to follow. All found this research and the exercise of examining student work to be instructive, with a college professor saying, “To hear a high school instructor describe their experience working with a student and trying to help that student come up with something to write about, and have that be appropriate to an academic writing situation, and how that translated and didn’t translate to what we would expect at the college level; this was really, really interesting.”

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### Products and Tools Developed

While the Affinity Network cultivated a process that led to new relationships and cross-sector knowledge building, it also resulted in the development of original materials and tools to strengthen instruction and student performance. Below, we highlight two examples of products worth disseminating to the field: the Oklahoma team’s writing assignment template, and the Washington team’s brochure that informs community, business, and other external stakeholder groups of current college and career readiness standards.

The Oklahoma English team, consisting of instructors from Southeast High School, Oklahoma City Community College, and the University of Central Oklahoma, began by soliciting sample writing assignments from their colleagues. Through its analysis, the group determined that it would be useful to create assignment templates to scaffold the teaching of writing through the later high school and early college years. Anchored in the Common Core standards, the first template is designed to serve as a guide or calibration tool for use by groups of high school and college faculty in designing consistent and coherent sequences of assignments. Groups may refer to the template when developing assignments to be given simultaneously in English and in history or social studies courses, for example, or given in succession in high school and then in college. The aim is that the assignments and the expectations expressed by instructors (across or within sectors) explicitly reinforce specific skills, use consistent language, reference common examples, and progressively build upon what students have learned before.

As part of the Washington team’s commitment to engendering broader support for the Common Core State Standards and college and career readiness for all students, the team developed a brochure titled *Profile of a College and Career Ready Student*. The brochure illustrates the changing nature of college and career readiness by contrasting college and career preparation for a graduate in the year 2000 with that of a 2015 graduate. For example, in addition to the modifications associated with new standards, the use of technology, assessments, and accelerated course work has changed. The brochure is being sponsored and disseminated by all of the Washington Affinity Network partners — Spokane Public Schools, Community Colleges of Spokane, Eastern Washington University, and Washington State University.

### Sustaining Collaborative, Cross-Sector Professional Learning

By design, the Affinity Network was meant to seed a collaborative process. It was a pilot initiative that would be judged by whether the participants found sufficient value in the work to continue on their own. Hence, it was not expected that this first year’s efforts would immediately result in student learning gains or other measurable outcomes. Rather, the desired outcome would be a continuation of these initial attempts to foster professional learning among practitioners who are concerned for students on one or the other side of the bridge between high school and college, but who rarely cross over themselves.

All of the state teams have made plans to continue and broaden their efforts, and to share them with decision-makers in their states. They are pursuing multiple approaches at different levels — within, across, and beyond their institutions — to institutionalize this new model for professional development, and to further and strengthen cross-sector collaboration.

Teams such as those from Indiana and Oklahoma plan to invite other neighboring school districts to join their efforts. In Georgia, state leaders are looking to the Affinity Network to inform the state’s P–20 groups and related alignment work being done in partnership with Complete College America.<sup>12</sup> Teams are also developing plans to incorporate cross-sector learning into their district professional development plans. For example, the Maryland team is investigating the feasibility of continuing these efforts as an intensive summer institute, with follow-up meetings during the academic year.

These intentions for sustaining the work have a good likelihood of seeing fruition, since the state teams purposely included the leaders of the participating institutions. These leaders have the authority to change the way professional development is carried out in their regions, and they have the influence needed to bring others into the effort. Hence, the Maryland team plans to create a regional administrative “think tank” that will develop procedures and policies to further chip away at the cross-sector divide; drive a joint professional development agenda; and forge links to the four-year system, particularly the schools of education.

In Oklahoma, the city’s school superintendent and other top-level administrators consistently attended the Affinity Network team meetings, sending a signal as to the importance of the work. These administrators collaborated in producing a white paper that proposes a Central Oklahoma Regional Educational (CORE) Partnership. The partnership would meet twice a year to share data across the sectors and plan solutions to common problems. The vision is to restrict the partnership to the existing institutions for the first year but then expand to include additional members from the area over time.

The Washington team has produced a similar document, aiming to establish a regional professional learning exchange as a way to build upon these efforts and to reinforce a shared commitment to smoothing the P–20 continuum and secondary to postsecondary transitions. The Washington team will continue to engage key internal and external stakeholders, such as members of the local government and chamber of commerce and regional foundations and community groups, to help them understand the importance of Common Core State Standards adoption in connection with the state’s education and workforce development goals.

## CONCLUSION

The word “affinity” refers to a feeling of identification, a connection, a community of interest. At the Affinity Network capstone meeting, the 100-plus participants from different states, institutions, and disciplines seemed to be speaking with one voice. They repeatedly declared their desire for continued cross-sector collaboration and learning at the administrator and instructor levels. Surely professional development should take place horizontally *and* vertically, as one participant said, and it should also be cross-curricular, in that the different disciplines should not be confined to their own course work. Secondary and postsecondary faculty should have coordinated common time to jointly examine and improve pedagogy as well as content knowledge. While this is not how professional learning has been commonly carried out, a shift to this model that brings the adults together surely will help the students cross the divide.

## NOTES

1. See, for example, the federally funded TRIO programs, such as GEAR UP; STEM pipeline programs such as the National Math and Science Initiative; regionally based programs that support students from high school into the first year of college such as Bottom Line; programs that provide high school students with opportunities to take college courses to gain an early college experience; and initiatives like the College Advising Corps, funded with support from AmeriCorps. In addition, P-16 or P-20 councils or advisory bodies are regional or state entities that review practices and policies affecting student transitions.
2. <http://www.act.org/research-policy/national-curriculum-survey>
3. Libby A. Nelson, "Common Core Curriculum for K-12 Could Have Far-Reaching Effects on Higher Education." *Inside Higher Ed*. May 3, 2013. <http://www.insidehighered.com/>
4. "Why Should Higher Education Be a Partner in the CCSS effort?" Nancy S. Shapiro and Zakiya Lee, University System of Maryland. Affinity Network blog posting.
5. Hart Research Associates. March 2013. "Teachers Assess Implementation of the Common Core," Survey Among K-12 Teachers.
6. Joellen Killion, "Words That Fail Professional Learning." *Ed Week*. March 29, 2013. [http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/learning\\_forwards\\_pd\\_watch/2013/03/words\\_that\\_fail\\_professional\\_learning.html](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/learning_forwards_pd_watch/2013/03/words_that_fail_professional_learning.html)
7. Linda Darling-Hammond, "Teaching as a Profession: Lessons in Teacher Preparation and Professional Development." *Phi Delta Kappan* 87, no. 3. November 2005, 237-240.
8. Gene Bottoms, senior vice president of the Southern Regional Education Board, likes to refer to common practice in professional development as "spray-on."
9. Susan Bickerstaff and Nikki Edgecombe, "Pathways to Faculty Learning and Pedagogical Improvement." *Inside Out*, 1, no. 3. A publication of the Scaling Innovation project. Community College Research Center. December 2012.
10. The federally funded Community Center for Teaching Excellence is a K-20 partnership in New York State that is developing high-impact teaching strategies informed by a professional learning community. See <http://www.communitycenterforteachingexcellence.org/>
11. There is some evidence that this approach to professional development positively influences teaching as well as the professional culture. See the studies cited in "What the Research Says (or Doesn't Say): Improving the Focus of Professional Development for Schools." Published on *Education Northwest* (<http://educationnorthwest.org>).
12. Complete College America is a national nonprofit organization that works with states to increase the number of individuals with college credentials. See <http://completercollege.org/about/>.



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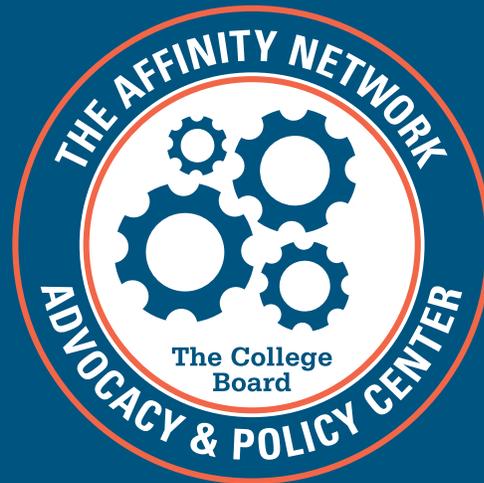
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