Achievement Level Descriptors and Standard Setting:
Plan for Higher Education Engagement and Decision-making

July 30, 2012
Essential elements of assessment systems designed to measure student growth and achievement are achievement level descriptors that define the extent to which students have mastered the knowledge, skills, and abilities measured by the assessment and the determination of student scores that correspond with those pre-defined levels (a process commonly referred to as standard setting). This document provides an overview of the processes that the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium will use to develop achievement level descriptors (ALDs) and conduct standard-setting.

K–12 education reform is centered on the goal that all students complete high school ready for success in college and the high-performance workplace. The Common Core State Standards made an important step toward that goal by defining the knowledge, skills, and abilities in mathematics and English language arts that students must learn in order to be ready for college. To reflect the standards, the Smarter Balanced assessment system will measure the extent to which students have mastered this material and establish an achievement level that colleges and universities can use to exempt students from the need for remedial coursework. When the Consortium applied for a Race to the Top assessment grant, higher education leaders in the member states committed to working on the development of the assessment system with the goal of integrating it into their placement policies. If colleges and universities recognize student performance on the Smarter Balanced assessment in their course placement policies, it will send a powerful message to students, parents, teachers, and school leaders about the importance of mastering the Common Core.

Higher Education's Role in Development and Decision-Making

Because colleges and universities have been asked to recognize the Smarter Balanced 11th grade summative assessment as evidence that students are ready for entry-level courses and may be exempted from remediation, higher education faculty must play a lead role in determining the level of mastery necessary for this designation. Doing so will involve developing an operational definition of college readiness in English language arts and mathematics, creating ALDs for the 11th grade summative assessment that are in sync with that definition, and determining appropriate scores aligned with those achievement levels.

As a consortium of states, all major assessment design decisions in Smarter Balanced are subject to a vote of the Governing States. Because both K-12 and higher education will use the results of the 11th grade assessment (the 11th grade summative assessment will be an important feature of K-12 accountability systems), state votes to approve and adopt ALDs and aligned scores must reflect a consensus opinion of both sectors.

The roles of higher education in development and decision-making have been incorporated into Consortium policy via a vote of the Smarter Balanced Executive Committee. When the state representative (typically the chief state school officer or state “K-12 Lead”) casts a vote on these matters, he or she will be required to affirm that the decision reflects a consensus opinion with higher education and to provide the name of the higher education official (either the SHEEO or designated state “Higher Education Lead”) who can verify that consensus was reached.1

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1 Independent colleges and universities are welcome to participate, but the primary commitment to work on development of the Smarter Balanced assessment system and to consider its use as an indicator of college readiness was made on behalf of public institutions.
Achievement Level Descriptors

Higher education will be integrally involved in developing the college readiness definition and achievement level descriptors this summer and fall. The Higher Education Leads will discuss this topic among themselves at a meeting on August 7 and with their K-12 counterparts and state Chiefs on September 11 and 12. On October 1–5, a workshop will be held to draft achievement level descriptors (ALDs) for the Smarter Balanced assessments for English language arts/literacy (ELA/literacy) and mathematics in Grades 3–8 and 11. The workshop will convene K–12 and higher education faculty and other experts from across the United States to develop documents that summarize the knowledge, skills, and abilities expected of students at each achievement level in the Smarter Balanced assessment system. Each state will have the opportunity to nominate faculty for the drafting workshop; the nomination process will begin in early August with nominations due by September 7.

Subsequent to the drafting workshop, there will be several rounds of review and revision prior to a state vote in early 2013. Higher education faculty from across member states will have the opportunity to review the draft documents and offer comments. The Higher Education Leads are putting together faculty committees to review these and other key documents from the Consortium. In addition, the Consortium will provide an opportunity for state K-12, higher education, and policy leaders (typically the Chief State School Officer, SHEEO, and governor’s chief education policy aide) to discuss the ALDs and college readiness definition both within their state and with colleagues from their geographic region prior to a state vote. Smarter Balanced plans to hold three regional meetings in fall 2012 for this purpose.

Standard Setting

The process of determining score levels associated with the Achievement Level Descriptors will not occur until data on student performance have been collected through a large-scale field test in spring 2014. The design process for Standard-setting has just begun, but efforts are already underway to identify new technology-mediated approaches that would allow for an unprecedented level of stakeholder involvement. Additional information will be shared with the Higher Education Leads as the design process progresses.