

Core College Evaluation

STATEWIDE NETWORKS

Connecting Education Systems and
Stakeholders to Support College Readiness

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WestEd's Evaluation of the Core to College Initiative

Core to College: Preparing Students for College Readiness and Success is a three-year initiative funded by the Lumina Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors serves as the fiscal sponsor.

Core to College's mission is "to facilitate greater coordination between K–12 and postsecondary education systems around implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and aligned assessments." The initiative aims to foster shared ownership of college readiness by the K–12 and postsecondary sectors, including use of the CCSS-aligned assessments to determine a student's readiness for credit-bearing postsecondary courses. Core to College grants have been awarded to teams in Colorado, Florida, Hawaii, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Oregon, Tennessee, and Washington.

Each of these state teams has designated an Alignment Director (AD) who is tasked with leading the Core to College work in the state. Through the consulting company Education First, Core to College offers one-on-one and cross-state technical assistance to these ADs. Together, the ADs make up the grant's Learning Network, which provides facilitated peer-to-peer support, information sharing, and multi-state technical assistance to grantee states.

WestEd is providing evaluation services over the course of the initiative. The evaluation plan is designed to synthesize the progress of the initiative and its participating states over the next few years, with a focus on the initiative's primary goals: creating statewide definitions of college and career readiness, using the PARCC and Smarter Balanced assessments to inform decisions about student placement into credit-bearing college courses, and aligning K–12 and postsecondary policies to the CCSS.

As part of its evaluation effort, WestEd has proposed to evaluate the initiative based on five action areas involved in changing policy and practices around the implementation of the CCSS and aligned assessments for improving college readiness. These action areas attempt to encompass the policy, practices, and people dimensions of the Core to College effort; they center around how the policy and practices involved in implementing the CCSS and the alignment of state assessment practices can improve students' readiness for college change over time. The five action areas are strategic planning, infrastructure, stakeholder engagement, policy and governance, and data and analysis.

Cross-state, multi-method, qualitative reports are at the center of the evaluation, which will systematically chronicle the progress of the initiative. Reports will focus on topics of interest to the funders; the Learning Network; and Education First, the initiative's technical assistance provider. These studies are intended both to illuminate promising strategies and to document challenges.

The WestEd evaluation team understands that each state is approaching the implementation of the CCSS with its own set of parameters and context: differing stakeholders, funding concerns, size and scope, timelines, and internal priorities. The evaluation activities are intended to recognize that variation and highlight how Core to College can learn from it.

Executive Summary

The Core to College grant model places one individual—the Alignment Director (AD)—at the hub of a statewide reform effort. While ADs in each state are housed in different locations and have different responsibilities, each serves as the nexus of communication for the Core to College–related efforts in their state. As states are now nearing the end of their three-year Core to College grants, this evaluation cycle report focuses on the strategies that ADs have used to inform and engage others in the state, particularly around their states’ top priority goals for Core to College.

Specifically, the report describes the depth and breadth of the *social networks* that have been developed or leveraged as a result of the AD’s work. The term social network refers to a collection of individuals and/or entities that are tied together through various formal and informal relationships. WestEd chose to examine *social networks* because, increasingly, researchers have noted the importance of understanding the interconnections between individuals and organizations in order to know the potential for innovation and reform efforts to spread and take root.

Evaluation data came from AD interviews and surveys administered to key collaborators. The research focused on three driving questions:

- What does the current social network in each state tell us about how the Core to College initiative has spread across the state?
- What does this network suggest about the probability of sustained activity for Core to College efforts?
- What strategies have the Alignment Directors in each state used to engage stakeholders? How have those strategies contributed to the development of a connected social network in the state?

Observations

Through this evaluation cycle, we obtained a deeper understanding of the networks that were either developed or leveraged (or both) by the Core to College Alignment Directors (ADs). The observations below summarize what we know at this point, in Year Three of the grant, about these networks. The actual long-term sustainability and efficacy of the network may not be evident for several years.

The networks are continuously evolving. There is a natural evolution to these networks, in part due to the readiness of the players to take action as well as to the relative time necessary for meeting different goals.

The interactions of the Core to College networks are primarily based on information sharing and making connections between K–12 and higher education. Across the

board, state strategies around Core to College priority goals focused primarily on informing and networking activities.

Information sharing and continued networking are critical to Core to College–related success. Survey respondents noted the importance—particularly for higher education—of learning more about CCSS and its potential impact on preparing students for college.

Higher education representatives have been heavily involved in Core to College. Approximately 70% of the key collaborators identified by ADs were from higher education, at either the state or local level.

Leveraging pre-existing networks or hubs may support greater potential for long-term, continuous sustainability. States that have been able to use previously established cross-sector networks may be able to more easily continue the work of the Core to College initiative beyond the life of the grant because the entities involved are not dependent solely on the funds from this project.

New nodes were developed through field-based activities. Some ADs sought to develop new nodes (i.e., the “actors”) in their network by fostering field-based pods of activity, like regional councils and faculty work groups.

Individual ADs found value in the cross-state network. The opportunity to learn from and share with colleagues in other states working on these same issues was very positive for the ADs. This sentiment was shared both by ADs who had been with the initiative since the outset and by new ADs who benefited from the wisdom of their colleagues in other states.

Considerations for the Future

The information gathered and analyzed during this evaluation cycle, and throughout the entire duration of the Core to College initiative, has led us to several considerations for the future of states’ efforts. These considerations apply both to current Core to College states and other states looking to ensure that their higher education systems are engaged alongside their K–12 systems to prepare for the changes coming with the new Common Core State Standards.

Understanding network structures and potential points of leverage ahead of time are important for the success of an initiative like Core to College. While this report has described the networks that states used for this initiative, the most effective time for understanding these networks and their particular ties and nodes is at the *outset* of a new initiative. Future efforts like this might benefit from deliberate analysis of the pre-existing networks, the missing links, and the best strategies for disseminating information, gathering feedback, and collaborating with stakeholders to work toward transformation.

Cultivating activities in local nodes may be the most effective way to achieve and sustain goals. While statewide planning and networking was critical to the Core to College work, the activities at the local and regional level led to more tangible outcomes such as course alignment, transition course development, and implementation of teacher training

and professional development. These localized efforts were a useful balance to system-wide policy discussions that often had longer timelines and more uncertain paths to navigate.

Ensuring the state is well situated to conduct the necessary validity studies for the CCSS-aligned assessments may be the most pressing issue for ADs in this last year of the Core to College initiative. A common challenge for many Core to College states is that it is too early for them to be able to make policy changes with regard to the use of the CCSS-aligned assessments for placement. Over the next several months, it will be valuable to the success of the initiative for ADs to help ensure that the proper systems and resources are in place to conduct necessary validity and reliability studies of the new CCSS-aligned assessments.

The work cannot continue without designated resources, both monetary and personnel. There have been many successes resulting from the work of the ADs and their networks in each of the states. Funding and designated personnel will be critical to continuing moving this work forward.

The experiences of the Core to College states should be shared to help other states working toward achieving similar goals. Moving forward, the networks' efforts could be leveraged by establishing an online resources library (which could include definitions of college and career readiness, examples of course alignment, and lessons learned from developing collaborative work groups) for all states seeking to make headway in this type of work.

Introduction

As states are now nearing the end of their three-year Core to College grants, it is helpful to take stock of the strategies they have used to address the initiative’s priority goals and to examine the extent to which those strategies have helped the Alignment Directors (ADs) in each state “facilitate greater coordination between K–12 and postsecondary education systems.”

The Core to College model places one individual—the AD—at the hub of a statewide reform effort. While ADs in each state are housed in different locations and have different responsibilities, each serves as the nexus of communication for the Core to College–related efforts in their state. This evaluation cycle report focuses on the strategies that ADs have used to inform and engage others in the state, particularly around their states’ top priority goals for Core to College.

Specifically, the report describes the depth and breadth of the *social networks* that have been developed or leveraged as a result of the AD’s work. The term social network refers to a collection of individuals and/or entities that are tied together through various formal and informal relationships. In the context of this report, an AD’s social network could be made up of higher education staff and leadership, K–12 personnel, and community stakeholders, with various types of interactions between these entities. Examining how ADs have established new networks or leveraged existing networks—and how the members of the network interact with the AD and with each other—can offer useful insights into the impact and sustainability of states’ Core to College efforts. This sort of analysis can also provide lessons for similar collaborative efforts in the future.

This research builds upon previous Core to College evaluation reports, particularly the first report, *Building Bridges Through Stakeholder Outreach and Engagement* (Austin et al., 2012). In that report, we examined the organizational and leadership strategies supporting stakeholder engagement at the outset of the project; we now revisit some of those initial strategies with a focus on the stakeholder networks that have developed and the ways in which the proposed strategies have ultimately taken shape within the states.

This report begins with a brief description of the methodology used for this evaluation cycle, followed by a literature review that examines the research on social networks and the implications of social networks for innovation and change in the field of education. Next, findings are presented on how the Core to College states have established new networks or leveraged existing networks for the purpose of implementing the goals of the initiative. This cross-state analysis includes spotlights on four states that represent a variety of social network structures. The report concludes with key observations about the Core to College networks and some considerations for the future for both the Core to College states and for other states that may attempt similar efforts.

Methodology

The evaluation team collected data through both Alignment Director interviews and surveys administered to “key collaborators.”

Interviews

The evaluation team interviewed Alignment Directors (ADs) in the Core to College states to better understand the reach and logistics of the Core to College work. ADs identified the Core to College priority goals for their state and the explicit strategies (e.g., statewide convenings, regional consortia, steering committees) that were used to engage others in Core to College efforts; they identified the strategies that have been most successful at engaging stakeholders, and noted the areas that have posed the greatest challenges. ADs also described the main social networks that they have engaged in their states, and commented on the extent to which they have leveraged existing relationships and networks and/or established new networks to support their Core to College efforts.

Driving Questions



What does the current social network in each state tell us about how the Core to College initiative has spread across the state?



What does this network suggest about the probability of sustained activity for Core to College efforts?



What strategies have the Alignment Directors in each state used to engage stakeholders? How have those strategies contributed to the development of a connected social network in the state?

Survey

To further understand these networks, WestEd evaluators created and distributed an online survey to ADs’ “key collaborators,” who were the individuals that ADs identified as having communicated or collaborated with most frequently in their Core to College work.¹ Survey questions covered involvement in Core to College efforts, the extent to which collaborators had shared information or collaborated with others as a result of this involvement, and the benefits of involvement in this initiative to either collaborators personally or to their organization.

¹ During this evaluation cycle, the Alignment Director position in Florida has been vacant. The evaluation team conducted an informational interview with a representative of the Florida grantee, but because the Florida-based Core to College efforts are currently on hold, we were unable to conduct surveys of key stakeholders in the state. Information gathered from the Florida interview contributes to our overall findings, but is not included in detail in the cross-state analysis.

Analysis

The evaluation team analyzed both the interview and survey data to better understand what the network of individuals who have been engaged in the Core to College efforts in each state looks like, how this network communicates and operates, and what the network might suggest about the potential for sustained activity after the Core to College grant is complete.

Overall, WestEd sent surveys to 82 collaborators identified by the ADs. Of these, 62 individuals (76%) completed the surveys. Appendix A shows the number of collaborators identified and the number of surveys completed by state.

Literature Review

For this evaluation cycle, WestEd chose to examine *social networks* because, increasingly, researchers have noted the importance of understanding the interconnections between individuals and organizations in order to know the potential for innovation and reform efforts to spread and take root. A social network map—a descriptive picture of what the network looks like, including which entities are connected and in what ways—helps one understand the potential for sustainability of an effort that requires collaboration and alignment across multiple individuals and organizations.

A social network is defined as a group of actors connected to one another through a set of relations or ties (Daly, 2010a; Scott & Carrington, 2011). A network view allows researchers to examine the web of relationships between various actors, to understand the strength and nature of those connections, and to understand the extent to which this web constrains and/or provides opportunities (Borgatti & Ofem, 2010; World Bank, 2007).

Social network analysis is a methodology that focuses on understanding the nature and consequence of relationships and the flow of information between individuals, groups, and organizations (Borgatti & Ofem, 2010; Coulon, 2005; Penuel, Sussex, Karbak, & Hoadley, 2006). Social network analysis has its foundation in a number of fields, including mathematics, spatial geometry, sociology, and anthropology (Fredricks & Carman, 2013). In social network analysis, the focus is on the structure of the relationships between the actors/entities, not the attributes of the individual actors (Borgatti & Ofem, 2010; World Bank, 2007).

Social network analysis has become more prevalent in the study of systems change as it has become clear that strong social networks are associated with “increased individual and organizational performance” (Coburn, Choi, & Mata, 2010, p. 33). Researchers inside and outside of education have found that strong social networks (and the social links both within and across organizations) help with the depth of implementation of reform as well as the capacity of organizations to change (Moolenaar & Slegers, 2010). Finnigan and Daly (2010) argue that organizational reform efforts are socially constructed, and that examining the underlying social networks can provide insights into how these relational structures support and/or constrain reform efforts. A primary goal of social network analysis in the context of evaluation studies is to assess the value of using collaboration as a strategy for improving program outcomes, such as fostering innovation or improving productivity (Penuel et al., 2006).

At the heart of social network theory is the concept of social capital, which, according to Daly (2010b), is “an investment in a system’s social relations through which the resources of other individuals can be accessed, borrowed, or leveraged” (p. 4). Social capital can be thought of as “an organization’s pattern of social relationships through which the resources of individuals can be accessed, borrowed, or leveraged” (Moolenaar & Slegers, 2010, p. 99).

Nodes and Ties

To understand a social network, one must look at the various individuals and groups involved, and how they connect and interact with one another. The map of these connections can take many forms—from a complex web to a loosely connected set of hubs and spokes. These entities and their interconnections are typically referred to as the *nodes* and *ties* that exist within the network.

The nodes are the actors, which can be people, groups or organizations, or any entity that can have a relationship with another entity (Borgatti & Ofem, 2010; Daly, 2010b; World Bank, 2007). The ties (or links) represent the connections or flows between the nodes. The ties should not be treated in isolation (Coburn et al., 2010); rather, the ties link up to form different paths, allowing the nodes to directly or indirectly influence one another. There are many types of ties, including ties based on social contacts, information sharing, knowledge production, and exchange of money or resources (Brass, 2012; Daly, 2010b; World Bank, 2007).

It is possible to have both strong and weak ties, and both can be important to social networks, serving different purposes. Stronger ties between nodes are typically representative of closer connections or more frequent interactions between nodes (Easley & Kleinberg, 2010). Networks with strong ties are often more dense, and the strong ties involve everyone being connected in a way that their behavior cannot help but be observed by others, which supports the transfer of “tacit, non-routine and complex knowledge” (Daly, 2010b, p. 4). A network with strong ties is hypothesized to increase conformity to norms, resulting in greater trust between the members of the group. By contrast, less dense networks, with fewer connections across all the nodes and with weaker ties, are best suited for the transfer of simple routine information (Daly, 2010b; Coburn, Choi & Mata, 2010).

There can be varying levels of interaction between the different nodes in the network. For instance, Cashman et al. (2014, p. 12) identify four distinct levels of interaction:

- *Informing*—sharing or disseminating information between individuals or groups.
- *Networking*—direct conversation/feedback between individuals or groups to gather different perspectives.
- *Collaborating*—engaging individuals in working together around an issue to produce something of value.
- *Transforming*—shared leadership and consensus building, cross-stakeholder engagement.

In our analysis of the Core to College states that comes later in this report, we adapted these different levels of interaction in order to categorize the flow of information between the different nodes within each state’s respective network. For our analysis, we used slightly different terminology than Cashman et al. (2014); specifically, we designated the first three levels of interaction as *information sharing*, *feedback*, and *collaboration*. We did not use Cashman et al.’s fourth level of interaction (transforming), as we did not find examples that would fit closely with the definition of that form of interaction.

Formal and Informal Networks

Social network theorists note that it is important to be aware of both formal and informal structures within an organization (Daly, 2010c). Most education reform research has traditionally focused on formal structures. Formal structures might look like a typical organizational chart, with a leader at the top and a tiered structure moving down the chart. Daly (2010c) notes that in a school district, for example, the formal structure would show the superintendent at the top, indicating the importance of that position in the formal structure. Understanding the formal structure is important because formal structures can create opportunities for interactions and can help ensure longevity if the ties can resist the “relational inertia” that can exist in networks (Daly, 2010c).

New research is increasingly focusing on informal structures as well, and examining how the informal interactions of individuals impact reform efforts (Daly, 2010c). An informal structure represents the influence of different individuals not specifically tied to their formal position but, instead, tied to their relationships to others in the system. Understanding an organization’s informal ties is important because informal ties can impact the success of formal structures (Daly, 2010c).

Daly (2010c) cautions that if ties that bring resources to an organization are tied to a single actor, those ties may leave when the individual leaves. This suggests the importance of not only developing informal ties but also creating “redundant connections” between the organization and the resources.

Implications of Social Network Research for Educational Innovation

The use of social network analysis in research examining innovation in different fields has increased as the importance of relationships and contexts, rather than individuals alone, has been acknowledged (Coulon, 2005). Recently, social network analysis has been used in evaluation research that recognizes social relationships and networks play a pivotal role in a program or initiative’s development, implementation, impact, and sustainability (Fredricks & Carman, 2013). Mohrman et al. (2003) argue that “lasting change does not result from plans, blueprints, and events. Rather change occurs through the interaction of participants” (p. 321). Understanding these interactions, therefore, helps one to understand the actual form and potential for change.

Social network analysis has been applied in many different fields, including education. As Judith Warren Little (2010) argues, researchers have moved from a more singular focus on the school as the unit of change to a more sophisticated examination of “nested organizational relationships.” Researchers are beginning to ask how the web of relationships through which “ideas, information, resources and influence flow” can help to explain patterns of stability and change in education (Little, 2010, p. xi).

Social network analysis has been used in different types of education research. For instance, some research examines the relationship between the quality of teacher collaboration and interaction and educational change on the local level (Peneul et al., 2006). Other research looks at the relationship between leadership and social networks in the implementation of

broader system change, either at the state or district level (Finnegan & Daly, 2010). Another strand of education research looks at the relationships between networks and formal and informal leaders, and the role that each play in educational reform (Daly, 2010b).

Researchers who have studied the value of social network theory for understanding educational change note that the study of interactions between the various individuals and organizations involved can help to understand the probability of making change “stick.” Little (2010) notes that social network research raises several important questions about what network relations tell us about the prospect of “scaling up” and sustaining educational innovations:

- How does the mapping of network ties and flows deepen our understanding of organizational capacity, including the nature of available expertise?
- What happens to organizational change trajectories when densely connected individuals leave organizations, potentially taking their network ties with them?
- What happens to the quality and reach of networks as organizational attention and resources shift over time? (p. xii)

In summing up the rationale for his edited volume on the use of social network analysis theory in education, Daly (2010b) notes that “better understanding of our complex social world provides insights and opportunities in developing and leveraging social capital, which may better enable change agents and the systems they serve to meet the increasing demand for educational change” (p. 16).

Social network analysis allows researchers to consider the strength and the nature of connections between actors, whether individuals or groups. Social network research in many different fields, including education, suggests that understanding the nature of the ties that connect the various actors to one another and across the network can be helpful in understanding the potential for the sustainability of reform or change efforts, like the Core to College initiative.

Building Core to College Networks

The Core to College Alignment Directors (ADs) are employing a variety of strategies to inform and engage stakeholders around the goals of the initiative. In some cases the ADs have leveraged existing formal and informal network structures; in other cases, the ADs have begun to develop new networks, connecting individuals and/or organizations that may not previously have worked together.

Each Core to College state has a unique network, and this report examines the different strategies, structures, and interactions of these networks. This section begins with summaries and illustrations of the networks in four of the Core to College states, selected as representative examples of different types of social networks. This section then explores some of the key findings on the characteristics of the networks across the states, the strategies used for reaching stakeholders, and the challenges for building and sustaining networks.

State Spotlights: Examples of Core to College Networks

The examples on the following pages illustrate the networks in four of the Core to College states—Hawaii, Louisiana, Tennessee, and Washington—which all represent different network structures. The ADs in each of these states play very different roles in establishing and leveraging their respective networks. Focusing on each state’s primary Core to College goals, we describe how each network functions, including the role of the AD and whether they have utilized existing network structures, established new networks, or merged together a combination of the two.

Each of these states’ networks is depicted through a social network diagram that illustrates the nodes (i.e., the entities that make up the network) and the interactions that occur between the various nodes. In this report, and in the social network diagrams, we have categorized the Core to College networks as engaging in three primary kinds of interaction:

- *Information Sharing*—providing information and/or raising awareness about the Common Core State Standards and aligned assessments.
- *Feedback*—gathering feedback and input from network members on key issues.
- *Collaboration*—fostering collaboration between network members on activities such as course alignment, transition course development, teacher training, and/or developing definitions of college readiness.

Hawaii: Soliciting Feedback from Multiple Sectors

Primary goal of the Core to College work

Hawaii's primary goal has been to develop and get approval for a definition of college, career, and community readiness.

What does the network look like?

The AD, in combination with others in the Hawaii P–20 office, used a combination of statewide committees and “road show” outreach to solicit direct feedback from stakeholders.

The hub. Hawaii's Core to College initiative is centered in the state's P–20 office, where the AD is housed. The P–20 office acts as the hub of the Core to College network in the state, and has been able to use working relationships and partnerships that were already in place prior to the Core to College initiative.

Core committee. Hawaii's network structure begins at the state level with a statewide committee consisting of a Board of Education member and representatives from Hawaii P–20, the state department of education, the governor's office, and the University of Hawaii system. This committee researched and developed an initial draft of the definition of college and career readiness.

Stakeholder outreach and feedback loop.

To reach other stakeholders in the network, representatives from Hawaii P–20 solicited direct feedback on the definition from local representatives of higher education and K–12, as well as from community leaders, parents, and business partners through a “road show” outreach approach. The P–20 representatives then took this feedback back to the statewide committee to refine the definition, which was ultimately brought to the P–20 council for adoption.

Statewide summits. Hawaii P–20 staff have also hosted statewide summits that include K–12 and higher education representatives and, in some cases, community representatives. The summits have focused on refining the definition, as well as on targeted issues like math placement.

The ongoing opportunity to work with postsecondary faculty from across the state has strengthened the understanding of what it means to be college ready in our state. The relationship building has led to local partnerships that involve high school teachers working directly with college faculty on meaningful projects. The meetings have led to a greater shared understanding of the Common Core and its importance.

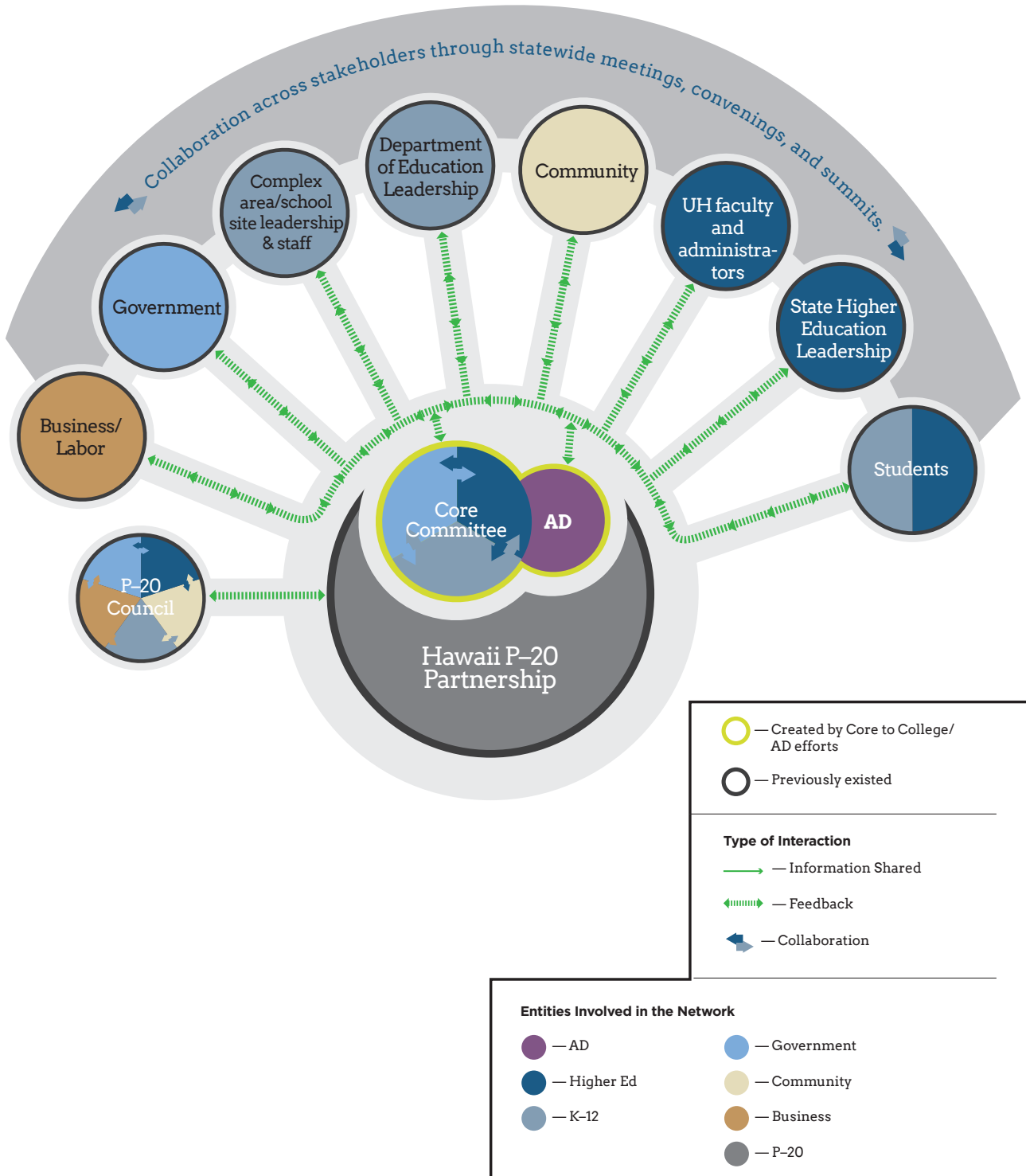
— Staff member,
Hawaii Department of Education

Hawaii

Priority goal: Developing a definition of college readiness.

Network model/approach: Hawaii’s approach involves soliciting and integrating continuous feedback. A statewide committee drafted an initial definition of college readiness, gathered feedback from a variety of constituents, and refined the definition accordingly. The P–20 council ultimately adopted the definition, which is now used by schools and colleges working on alignment activities.

AD role: The AD is a central part of this statewide committee, helping to “cross-pollinate” ideas to craft the definition, personally conveying information about the definition to various stakeholders, and using feedback to help refine the definition.



Types of network engagement

As described by the survey respondents, Hawaii’s network began with information-sharing and networking activities focused on developing the definition of college readiness. Now, the network shows many signs of collaborative activities at both the state and local level on curricular issues, professional development, and translation of the definition into specific indicators of college, career, and community readiness.

Louisiana: Creating a Network of Campus-Based Leadership Teams

Primary goal of the Core to College work

Louisiana’s primary Core to College goal has been increasing the consistency and stability of curriculum alignment across the state’s K–12 and higher education systems.

What does the network look like?

The AD, Jeanne Burns, capitalizes on her extensive reach and knowledge to stimulate and catalyze statewide input and collaboration on K–12 and higher education CCSS–alignment efforts.

The hub. Burns acts as her network’s hub. She is located within the state’s Board of Regents, and this positioning provides her with access to high-level leadership and administration at both the campus and state levels. Her long tenure in the position, and the recognition of the Board of Regents as a leader and thought-partner, support both new and longstanding colleagues’ continued trust in her judgment and expertise.

Core committee. The heart of Core to College alignment activities rests in Burns’ regional efforts within and across the two- and four-year college campuses. Through her Core to College activities, Burns has created campus-focused leadership teams that collaborate on aligning K–12 and higher education efforts in preparation for full implementation of the CCSS and CCSS-aligned assessments. Formally, noted Burns, these leadership teams “provide input into the development and/or use of the Common Core State Standards and Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers [PARCC] in mathematics and English.” These teams gather individually for campus-based meetings and they convene as a larger group through statewide PARCC campus leadership team meetings.

As part of LSU’s recruitment, retention, and graduation initiatives, we will continue building extensive CCSS-aligned support systems for Louisiana students and teachers to better prepare high school graduates for the demands of postsecondary education.

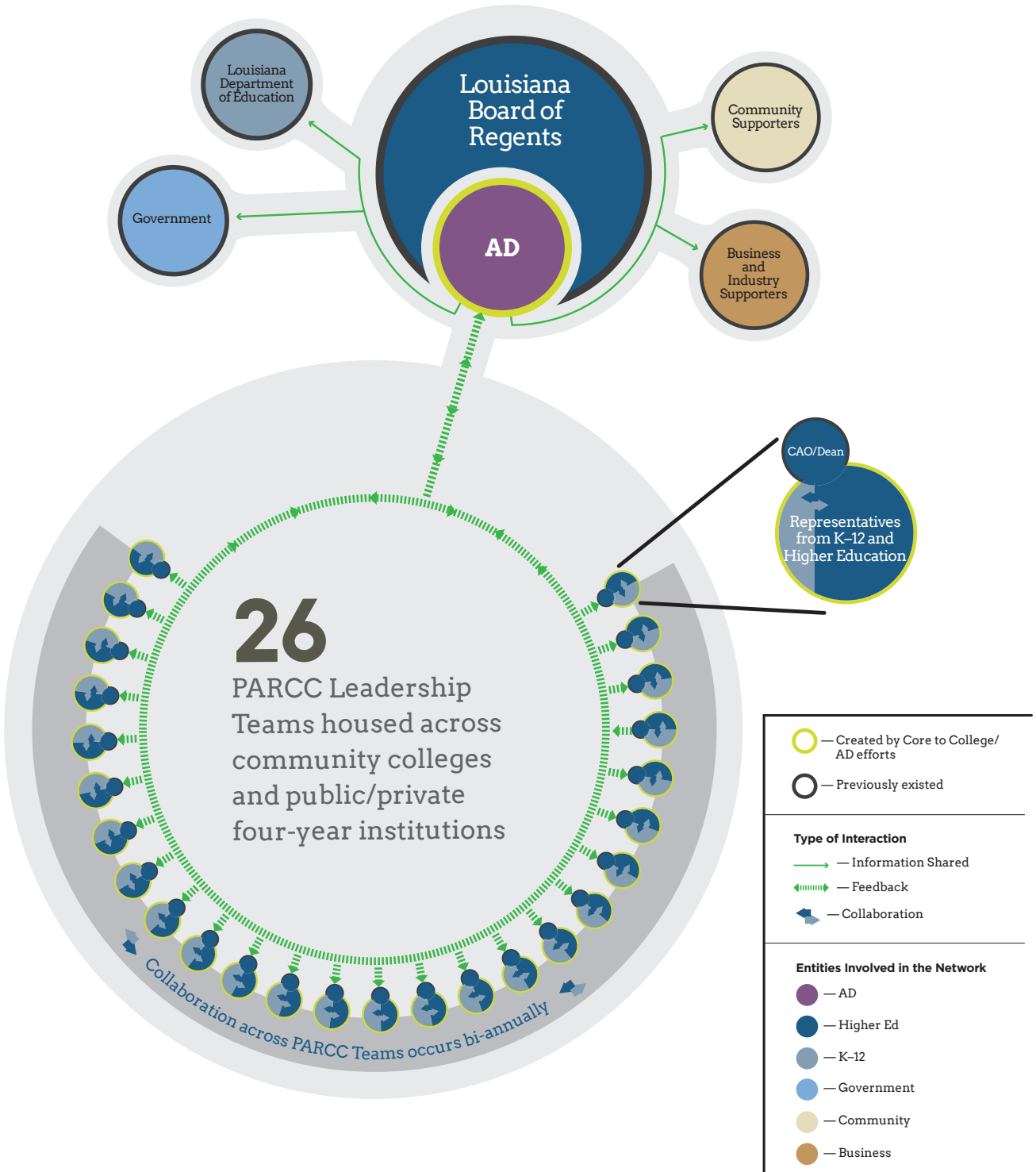
— Postsecondary faculty member

Louisiana

Priority goal: Curriculum alignment across K–12 and postsecondary systems.

Network model/approach: Louisiana’s AD created a model with campus-based leadership teams that focus on aligning K–12 and higher education efforts around CCSS implementation. These teams provide feedback (individually and collectively) to the AD and the Board of Regents, and conduct outreach and knowledge-sharing on their own campuses.

AD’s role: Within this model, the AD serves as the hub—connecting the campus teams directly to the Board of Regents and state PARCC efforts, and indirectly to other state entities like the Department of Education and workforce/community leaders.



To form these teams, Burns invited all public two- and four-year institutions, and private universities, to create PARCC campus leadership teams, led by senior officials. A senior administrator (the chief academic officer at the community colleges and dean of the college of education at the four-year institutions) leads each campus team. In addition to the leader, suggested team members include a researcher, representatives from the college of education (math and ELA methodology experts), math and ELA faculty, K–12 representatives (math and ELA teachers), teacher education faculty, and admissions representatives.

All of the 14 public universities have active leadership teams. In addition, all 12 of the community colleges formed teams, but only 8 are currently actively participating. Four of the five private universities have teams. To date, these teams have attended six statewide meetings over the past three and a half years.

Stakeholder outreach and feedback loop. Burns’ main contact with each campus team is through the dean of education or the chief administrative officer. Burns confirms that while these individuals are the primary people that she communicates information directly to, individual team members are also welcome to contact her with any additional feedback or questions.

Types of network engagement

As illustrated in the Louisiana network map, the state’s social network includes all three types of engagement: information sharing, feedback, and collaboration. The AD shares information with individuals in the government, business, and community sectors to ensure that they are kept abreast of high-level developments with the CCSS and PARCC. Information flow between the AD and the PARCC leadership teams is characterized by feedback, with a great deal of back and forth on specific projects and issues. Within the PARCC leadership teams, various representatives collaborate, and, in turn, share information from their work with local K–12 entities and within their higher education institutions.

Tennessee: Organizing Regional Curriculum Councils

Primary goal of the Core to College work

The primary goal for Tennessee, as outlined by the AD and confirmed through the surveys, is alignment between the K–12 and higher education systems, related to standards and expectations for college readiness. The specific focus of the alignment efforts differs in different regions of the state.

What does the network look like?

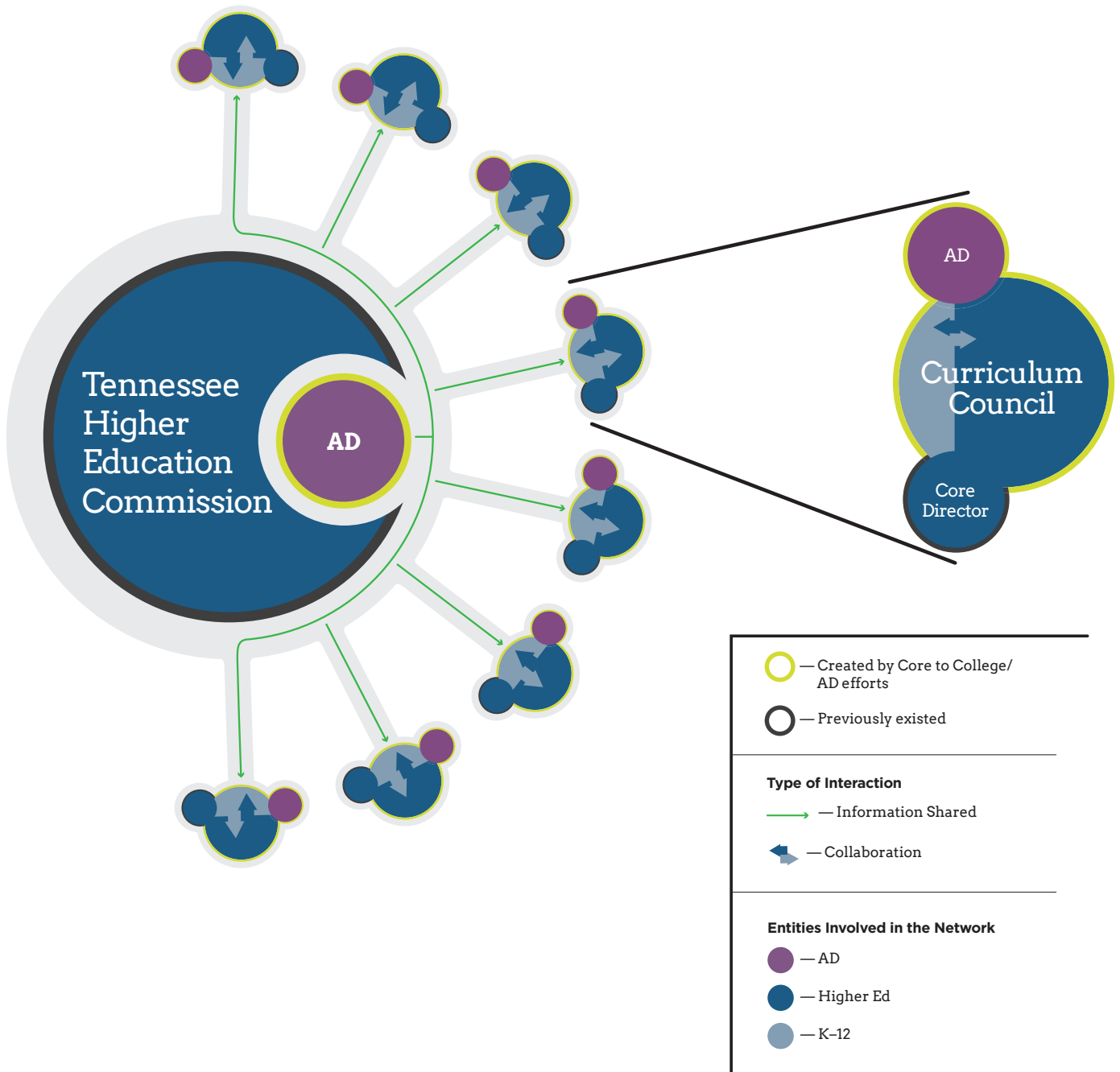
Tennessee uses a regional strategy, with eight “curriculum councils” established in each of eight regions in the state. These councils identified their own priorities based on six possible “areas of opportunity.”

Tennessee

Priority goal: Alignment of K–12 and postsecondary systems.

Network model/approach: Tennessee uses a regional approach driven by “curriculum councils” established in the eight Center of Regional Excellence (CORE) regions; while the AD organizes and co-facilitates all curriculum council meetings, individual councils identify their own goals and set their own agendas.

AD role: The AD is the orchestrator of the regional curriculum councils—helping to establish them, organizing and co-facilitating their meetings, and communicating statewide about their work through a Core to College website and newsletter.



The AD as facilitator of the regional councils. The AD in Tennessee has acted as a “hub” that helped to establish the eight regional curriculum councils, plan their meetings, and share information on Core to College and on specific council activities with group participants. The AD also co-facilitates meetings with local Centers of Regional Excellence (CORE) directors, who are regional representatives of the state department of education.

Regional councils. Membership in the eight curriculum councils varies in part depending on the priorities established for the region. Generally there is a “council at large” that includes approximately 50–60 people from across K–12 and higher education systems, with some business representation as well. Many regions also have sub-councils that may include more practitioners to work on specific tasks.

Much of the councils’ work focuses on providing opportunities for individuals from different sectors to collaborate with one another on specific alignment-related work. This collaboration occurs on different issues, such as professional development related to CCSS implementation, development of formative assessment item banks, and curriculum alignment. In theory, the council members are to share the results of this work with the larger community; this has happened in some cases, but not all.

I have seen more realization by both K–12 and higher education [representatives] of the need to vertically align curriculum in the past three months than ever before.

— Regional CORE Director

The eight curriculum councils do not necessarily interact with one another; the Core to College website and newsletter have served as the primary source of information across councils. (In some cases, if a higher education institution spans multiple regions, it may be represented on more than one council.)

Moving to regional hubs. The network is currently undergoing a shift, as the AD will be leaving and transferring responsibility for the curriculum councils directly to the regional CORE directors through mini-grants. This will “decentralize the hub,” making each regional CORE director the hub for their regional curriculum council.

Types of network engagement

The network in Tennessee is primarily focused on information sharing. The AD serves as the primary point person for information sharing, as she organizes the curriculum councils and provides information to them on issues related to the CCSS and to PARCC assessments. Survey respondents who were involved in the curriculum councils noted their role in helping to recruit participants to the council and to raise awareness about CCSS in general. Higher education respondents noted a role in communicating with their colleagues about the value of CCSS and about the changes to expect as the standards are implemented.

Washington: Cultivating Cross-Sector Partnerships

Primary goal of the Core to College work

Washington's primary goal has been to lay the groundwork for the formal use of CCSS-aligned assessments in higher-education student placement through regional partnerships and engagement of K–12 and higher education faculty.

What does the network look like?

Washington's AD, Bill Moore, has leveraged existing relationships with individuals in higher education and K–12 leadership, developed through past work and collaborations, to raise awareness of Smarter Balanced and new standards of college readiness. He has also engaged faculty throughout the state in CCSS alignment activities and has promoted collaboration between the K–12 and higher education systems by forging new work groups.

Steering committee. The Core to College Steering Committee includes representatives from higher education (including staff from the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, Student Achievement Council, and Workforce Programs), as well as K–12 (i.e., the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction). The members of the steering committee represent Core to College at meetings within their own organizations, recruit volunteers for faculty review groups, and work to keep both the K–12 and higher education communities informed of the Core to College efforts.

Higher education outreach. Moore conducts outreach as he travels throughout the state and meets with provosts, presidents, and vice presidents at community and technical colleges and four-year institutions to raise awareness about the Smarter Balanced assessments, changes in expectations related to Common Core content and instruction, and the potential impact on higher education, and to get buy-in around the work of Core to College.

Faculty work groups. Moore convened faculty work groups from K–12 and higher education to review and provide feedback on Smarter Balanced assessment items, discuss course alignment, develop transition courses, and act as ambassadors of Core to College at their home campuses. Getting faculty engaged in hands-on work—like reviewing assessment items and achievement level descriptors, providing feedback to Smarter Balanced, and working on course design—has been the primary driver of Washington's grassroots efforts.

Regional partnerships. Regional partnerships funded by Core to College have brought together school districts and community colleges to focus on local interests and design

Core to College related activities are essential to the success of my students... [My university] is working with local feeder K–12 districts to begin to rethink and redesign our first-year composition courses.

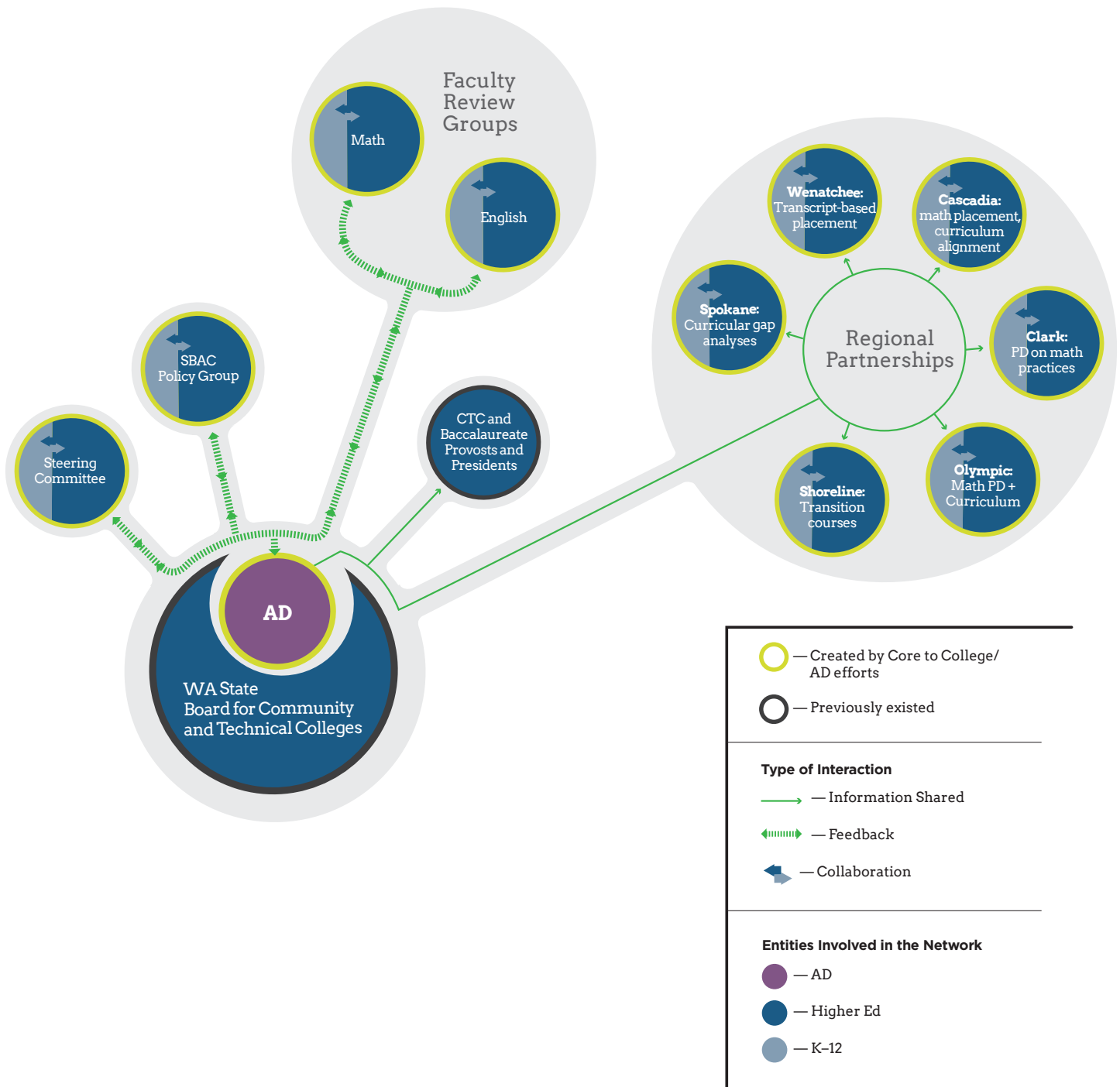
— Professor, four-year university

Washington

Priority goal: Laying the groundwork for use of CCSS-aligned assessments.

Network model/approach: The AD uses a multi-pronged approach to building cross-sector awareness and engagement around Washington’s priority goal: engaging with leadership via meetings, presentations, and a cross-sector steering committee; developing Smarter Balanced–focused faculty work groups; and funding regional partnerships between K–12 and higher education.

AD role: The AD acts as a cultivator for the Core to College work: paving the way for change by getting stakeholder buy-in across sectors; seeding the work by convening faculty to address CCSS assessment and curriculum; and providing resources to regional partnerships for context-specific alignment work.



their own CCSS-focused projects, including aligning K–12 and higher education courses, developing a process to use transcripts for placement, conducting curriculum gap analyses, and co-designing first-year courses.

Types of network engagement

Moore has focused on information sharing at the leadership level as well as collaboration at the faculty level, gradually building “on-the-ground,” cross-sector partnerships geared toward improving student outcomes. In 2014, he convened a cross-sector Smarter Balanced policy recommendation group of K–12 and higher education faculty and administrators to draft recommendations related to the Smarter Balanced assessments. The organization of community and technical college presidents (on behalf of Washington’s 34 community and technical colleges) has approved the recommendations, while the six public four-year institutions will vote in fall 2014.

As the above examples illustrate, each network is unique and is influenced both by the state’s structures and systems and by the position and influence of its AD. The most important component of the networks is not just the *nodes* themselves (i.e., all the individuals or entities involved in the network), but the interactions that occur between nodes (i.e., the *ties*), which represent the way the network is able to accomplish its work.

Building on these four state spotlights, our discussion below looks more closely across all of the Core to College states at the development and use of networks to address the goals of the initiative.

Prioritizing the Core to College Goals and Approaches

The Core to College initiative focuses on three main goals: (1) establishing a common definition of college readiness, (2) laying the groundwork for the use of CCSS-aligned assessments, and (3) improving alignment between the K–12 and postsecondary systems around the implementation of the CCSS.

Alignment Directors self-reported on their Core to College work to date, indicating their top priority goal and the various strategies they have employed for addressing that goal. Table 1 highlights the top priority goal as identified by each state’s AD.

Table 1. Top priority goals for Core to College states

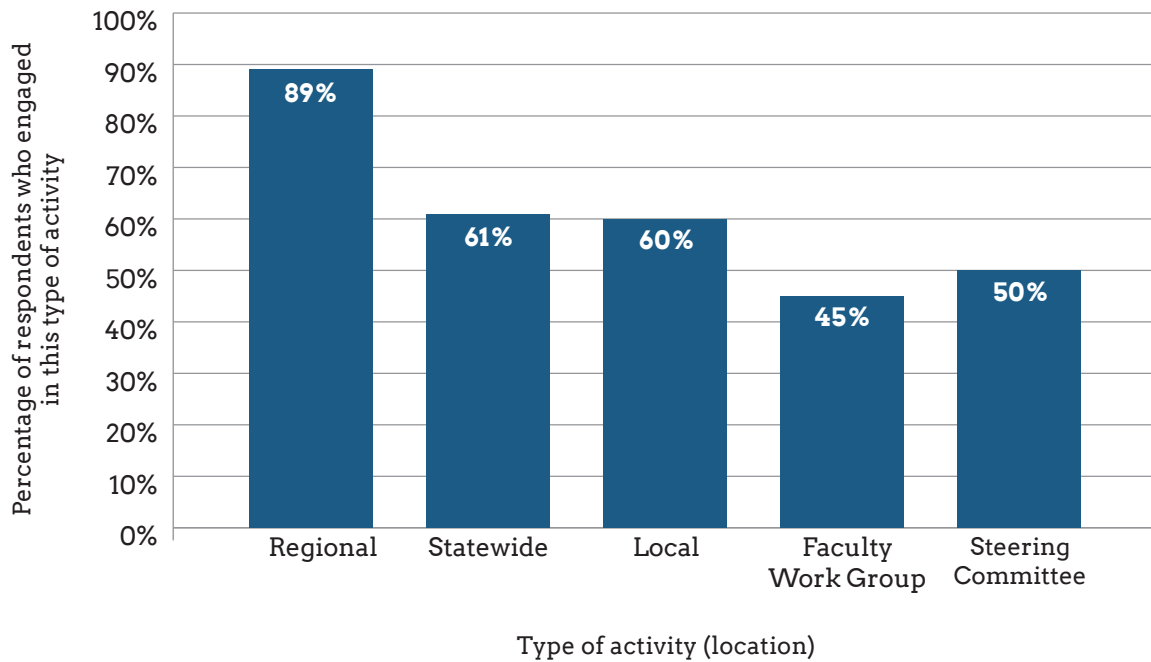
Establish a common definition of college readiness	Lay the groundwork for use of CCSS-aligned assessments	Improve alignment between K–12 and postsecondary systems related to CCSS implementation*
Hawaii Oregon	Massachusetts Washington	Colorado Kentucky Louisiana Tennessee

*This includes alignment activities related to courses, data and accountability, and professional development.

As individuals, ADs have leveraged existing capital to address the goals of the initiative. Over time, priorities may have shifted either as goals were accomplished (e.g., adoption of a common definition of college and career readiness) or as new stakeholders were engaged. ADs used a combination of state, regional, and local strategies, often based, in part, on the relationships that the ADs already had in place and on the particular priority goals on which they were focusing.

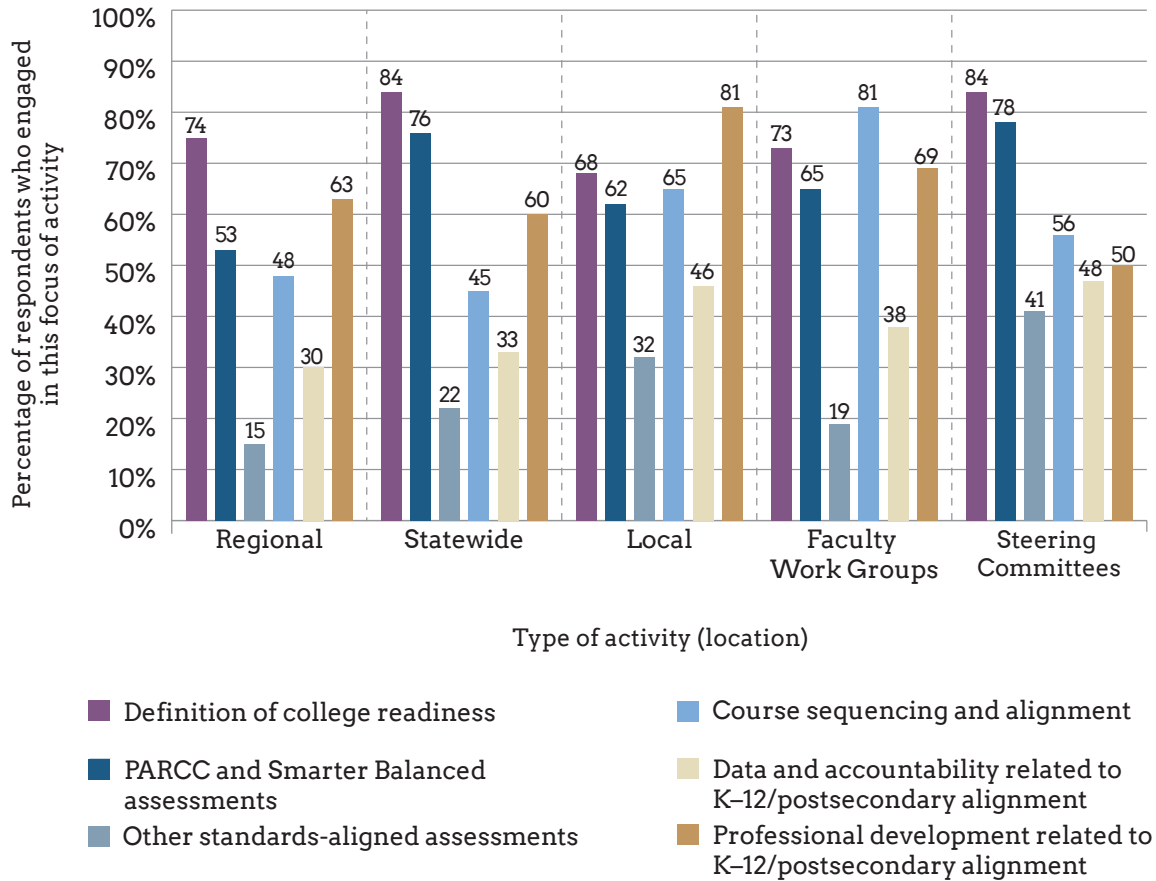
In our surveys of key collaborators across the states, we asked respondents to identify whether they had been involved in Core to College activities at the state, local, or regional level, or in faculty work groups or steering committees. And, for those activities in which these key collaborators were involved, the survey asked them to identify, from a list of possible responses, both the focus and purpose of those activities. The graphics below show the involvement of survey respondents in different types of activities and identifies their responses to questions about the focus and purpose of those activities in which they were engaged.

Figure 1. Percentage of survey respondents reporting participation in five types of Core to College activities



The majority of our survey respondents had participated in more than one type of activity. Not surprisingly, since they were considered “key collaborators,” most respondents indicated that they had been involved in statewide activities as well as either local or regional activities (or both).

Figure 2. Focus of activities, by type



As illustrated in Figure 2, above, developing a common definition of college readiness was mentioned as a top focus area across all types of activities. Many states began their Core to College–related activities with that approach, so it is not surprising that key collaborators would have been involved in discussions around this definition. The assessments being developed by the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (Smarter Balanced) were commonly mentioned as a focus of state and regional activities. Course sequencing was a main priority focus for local activities and faculty work groups; this seems logical as activities like course sequencing discussions are more likely to have an impact when done at the local or faculty level. It is also interesting to note that professional development was mentioned as a priority focus by the majority of respondents across all areas except steering committees (where only 50% of respondents indicated it was a priority).

Figure 3. Purpose of activities by type

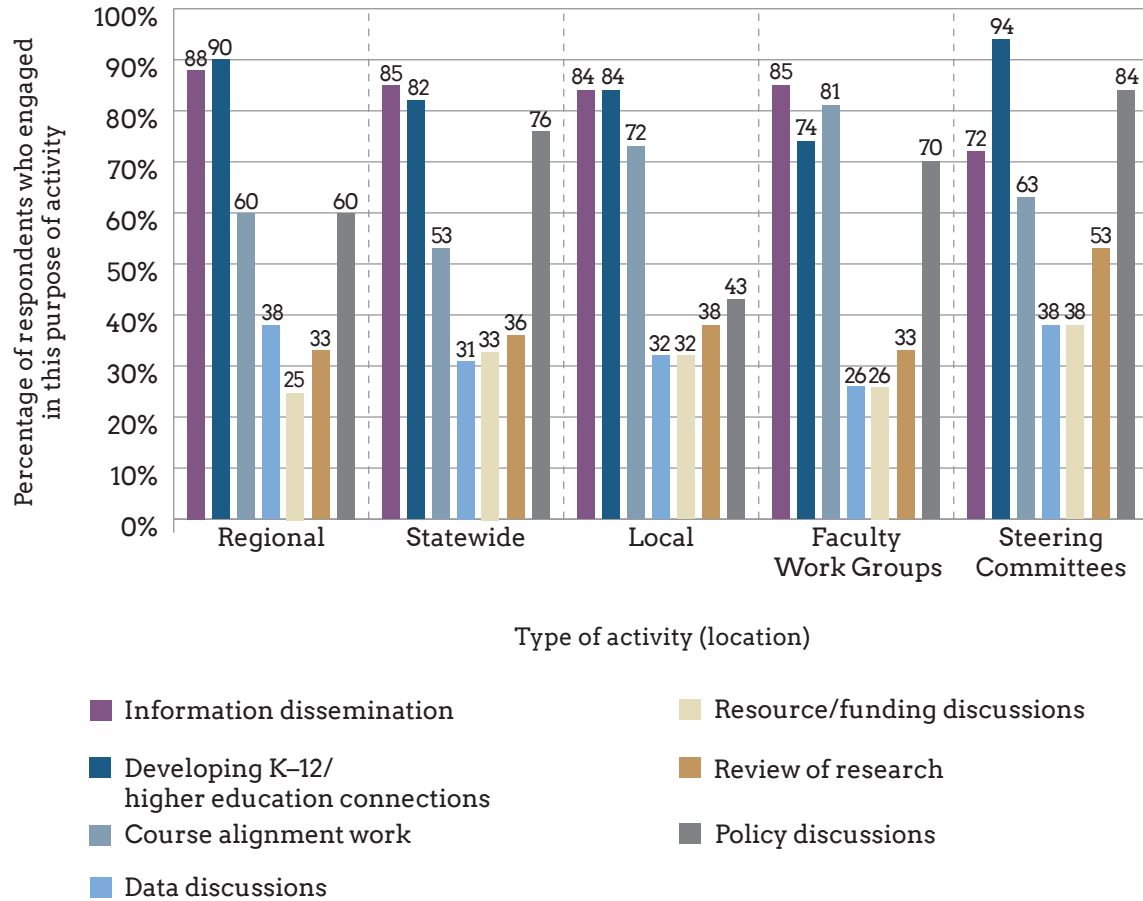


Figure 3 shows what respondents considered to be the purpose of the activities in which they engaged. Across the different types of activities, information dissemination and developing K-12/higher education relationships were the most commonly mentioned purposes. This is not surprising given that the Core to College networks are relatively new, and that providing information and developing initial relationships are necessary before other work can really begin. Again, we see some variation in the other priorities that rise to the top in the different types of activities. For instance, course alignment was identified as a primary purpose for local activities and faculty work groups, while a large majority of respondents who participated in steering committees identified policy discussions as a key purpose of those conversations.

Alignment Directors' Network Activities

Because the Core to College initiative places an individual, the Alignment Director, at the center of activities in the state, the specific role played by the AD is a critical component of the overall network structure. In some states, the AD acts primarily as an organizer and information disseminator, convening stakeholders and providing them with relevant information through a variety of strategies (e.g., Tennessee). In other states, the AD acts

more as an architect of the network, creating committees and developing new networks all in an effort to build upon the goals of the initiative (e.g., Louisiana). Still others serve more as a cultivator of the network, working more behind the scenes and from the bottom up to provide support to various collaborative activities (e.g., Washington).

As noted in previous evaluation reports, the AD is housed in different agencies in different states—and location plays a key role in how easily the AD can reach out across sectors, as well as the particular role(s) that the AD takes on. For instance, housing the AD in the P-20 office (Hawaii) or in a special joint cross-sector agency (North Carolina) helps those individuals reach across sectors just by the multi-sector nature of their organizations.

Strategies for Engaging Stakeholders

The strategies for growing and/or building a network need to fit the context of a given state, and map on to existing mechanisms for engaging stakeholders where possible and most prudent. In this evaluation cycle, ADs described specific state, regional, and local strategies they used to engage stakeholders in Core to College efforts. Some of the most common strategies used in the states included the following:

- Establishing cross-sector statewide steering committees (usually consisting of representatives from K–12, higher education, and government agencies) to guide and shape the specific work of Core to College. Depending on the priority goal for the state, these committees were often involved in drafting initial definitions of college readiness, planning a direction for alignment activities, and/or engaging in policy discussions around issues such as the potential use of the new PARCC/Smarter Balanced assessments for college placement decisions.
- Hosting large statewide convenings and summits that brought together faculty and administrators from K–12 and higher education (and, in some cases, business leaders as well). Large convenings often provided information on CCSS and CCSS-aligned assessments to large numbers of stakeholders and helped begin to develop a network of individuals across the different sectors. Statewide summits often brought faculty together to work specifically on issues of course alignment or course development.
- Conducting “road shows” to reach out to individual or small groups of stakeholders, providing information on Core to College issues and asking for direct feedback on policies and plans.
- Establishing websites and newsletters to provide informational resources that can be shared with large numbers of stakeholders.
- Organizing regional committees with cross-sector representation to disseminate information and to provide opportunities for cross-sector networking and collaboration around topics of specific importance to a given region in the state.
- Organizing faculty workgroups focused on specific topics, such as course alignment, transition course development, and professional development.
- Establishing campus fellows or local advisory teams specifically tasked with addressing PARCC or Smarter Balanced issues and communicating about those issues with the larger campus communities.

- Engaging college of education deans and faculty in discussions about how best to situate teacher preparation programs to prepare new teachers for the CCSS.
- Using a two-tier outreach approach to first engage decision-makers/campus leaders, followed by specific outreach to practitioners, including counselors and admissions directors.
- Providing mini-grants to institutions or partnerships for collaborative activities specific to their individual campus or region.

It is important to note that many of these strategies cost significant amounts of money, time, and resources. Core to College funds allowed ADs to organize and host many of these activities, which may not otherwise have been possible.

Leveraging Previously Established Networks and Individual Connections

While many ADs created new groups (i.e., nodes) to improve and grow cross-sector networks in their states, others capitalized upon previously established networks, which often enabled smoother, more wide-reaching outreach on the Core to College work than was possible for brand-new networks. For example, in **Hawaii**, the location of the AD within the P–20 office enabled the AD to use and expand upon already-established cross-sector relationships. Using the regional readiness centers (established through a Race to the Top grant) enabled the **Massachusetts** AD to do regional outreach that might not otherwise have been possible. And, in **Colorado**, the previous AD met on a biweekly basis with the Colorado Achievement Plan for Kids (CAP4K) Team, a group that was already established and which helps the AD and the Core to College team identify stakeholders and think through strategies.

Even in cases where ADs built new network nodes, they often used key individuals within their own preexisting network connections. For instance, **Tennessee’s** AD used the existing Centers of Regional Excellence (CORE) directors in the state’s eight regions to help facilitate and recruit for regional curriculum councils being set up throughout the state. These CORE directors are already responsible for regional collaborative efforts, so they can draw upon their own networks in developing and engaging these new curriculum councils. In **Washington**, the AD used connections established through prior work with the Transition Math Project to build upon previously established cross-sector relationships in order to build new nodes like the faculty work groups.

Leveraging PARCC/Smarter Balanced Consortia Activities

Several states leveraged their PARCC and Smarter Balanced connections as a specific component of their network. In **Louisiana**, for example, the AD established PARCC campus leadership teams on 26 higher education campuses. These teams—which consist of administrators, faculty members, and, in some cases, K–12 representatives—collaborate on both campus-based and system-wide CCSS implementation planning and alignment activities, and provide feedback to the AD about proposed policies and higher education CCSS endeavors.

In **Massachusetts**, 24 PARCC fellows (18 representing K–12 and 6 from higher education) serve as a resource for their region. Fellows meet together on a statewide basis, then bring information to their respective regions. The six higher education PARCC fellows also serve as PARCC campus contacts. These campus contacts, designated by their college president, convene their campus P–16 engagement teams and are the point person for all PARCC/CCSS information going to the campus (the work is supported through a \$2,000 Core to College mini-grant for campus engagement activities). PARCC campus contacts convene PARCC and CCSS presentations on their respective campuses. They also participate in regional PARCC activities, such as a recent meeting of guidance counselors and placement staff to discuss data sharing and the potential use of PARCC assessments for college placement.

In **Oregon** and **Washington**, cross-sector Smarter Balanced placement policy workgroups have focused on developing policy recommendations for the use of Smarter Balanced assessments for placement, focusing on topics such as the Achievement Level Descriptors and course sequences.

Impact and Reach of Networks

A key objective of the Core to College initiative has been to promote strong collaboration between the K–12 and higher education systems around the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and aligned assessments. By examining the social networks that were developed or used to reach stakeholders in each state, we have tried to understand the extent to which individuals from the different sectors have been engaged, the extent of that engagement, and the specific outcomes resulting from the cross-sector networks.

Network Nodes

As noted in the literature review, a network includes a set of nodes that are connected to one another by ties. In Core to College networks, while some nodes are individual actors (e.g., the AD or a college dean), in most states the nodes are entities or groups of stakeholders. The most frequent nodes were state K–12 and higher education leaders, K–12 district administrators or faculty, higher education faculty, higher education administrators (particularly deans of schools of education), regional committees, cross-sector faculty work groups, and business/community leaders. State legislators or the governor’s office were identified as nodes in only a few states (i.e., Massachusetts, Louisiana, and Hawaii).

To better understand the extent to which these networks involved different types of nodes (i.e., individuals from different sectors), the research team sought input from a variety of individuals who had been engaged in Core to College efforts. Alignment Directors were asked to identify up to 10 “key collaborators” in the initiative who could be surveyed about their understanding of and involvement in Core to College in their state. Table 2 shows the affiliation of the key collaborators identified by the ADs in each state.

Table 2. Distribution of key Core to College collaborators, by affiliation

State	State higher education office	Higher education institution faculty or administrator	State K–12 education office or board	K–12 district administrator	Other*	Total collaborators identified
Colorado	2	2	3	2		9
Hawaii	2	3	4			9
Kentucky		7				7
Louisiana	3	5	2			10
Oregon	3	6	2		3	14
Massachusetts	1	4	1		1	7
North Carolina	3	1	2		1	7
Tennessee	5	2	2			9
Washington	2	6	1			9
TOTAL	21	36	17	2	5	81
Percentage of total in each category	26%	44%	21%	2%	6%	

*Individuals in the “other” category include representatives from organizations outside of public education, including from other state agencies or external research organizations.

Note 1: Key collaborators were identified by each state’s Alignment Director.

Note 2: Due to rounding, percentages may not add up to 100.

As Table 2 indicates, 70 percent of the key collaborators identified by the ADs worked in higher education, either at the state or institutional level. A common theme among the survey responses from higher education representatives was the belief in the importance of bringing higher education to the discussion of CCSS, and the importance of raising awareness in the sector. As one community college faculty member in Washington noted:

Learning about the Common Core State Standards has helped us understand the shift we expect to see in the abilities of some incoming students over the next few years. The Standards for Mathematical Practice, which we learned about through the Core to College project, have played a small role in shaping initiatives in our own courses. And working with the local

high schools have helped us deepen connections with them, do some shared professional development that we [at the college] wouldn't otherwise have had, and create a transcript placement process.

It seems significant that such a large percentage of the identified key collaborators are from higher education; to date the CCSS has primarily been the purview of K–12, so the involvement of higher education representatives in discussions around this issue is significant. This involvement is particularly important given that establishing definitions of college readiness and engaging in course sequencing alignment—two of the primary goals of the Core to College projects—requires buy-in from the higher education community.

In contrast, the heavy emphasis on higher education representatives also means that there were fewer K–12 representatives who were considered key collaborators in this initiative. This may, in part, be because many of the ADs are housed in state higher education agencies, and therefore their primary network contacts also come from higher education. It may also be because it is much more difficult to reach local K–12 faculty and administrators for regular collaborative activities.

For a small number of K–12 survey respondents, Core to College felt like more of a higher education initiative in part because there was greater involvement by higher education representatives than by those representing K–12. For instance, a K–12 survey respondent from Tennessee wrote, “By representing (my) region, I feel I am the voice of K–12 as they are not as frequently in attendance as higher ed [at Core to College curriculum council discussions].” However, other K–12 respondents commented on the value of their involvement in the Core to College initiative. A K–12 state representative from Massachusetts stated, “Keeping abreast of current work in higher education lets me frame K–12 policy issues in a more nuanced way, and allows me to bring knowledge of college practices to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education’s work in curriculum development and school turnaround initiatives.”

Network Ties

In addition to understanding the various actors involved (i.e., the nodes of the network), it is also important to understand how those actors are linked to one another, to the AD, and to others in the network. Ties represent the various kinds of connections between the nodes. Most of the ties that we found in the Core to College networks were based on various types of information flow. As our state network diagrams illustrate, these information ties fell into three primary categories: *information sharing*, *feedback*, and *collaboration*.

In cases where the primary ties were based on information sharing, the AD typically “pushed out” information to the various stakeholders to raise awareness about CCSS and the related assessments. For example, **Colorado’s** AD frequently mentioned the impact of sharing critical information through the state’s district at-a-glance data summaries, which illustrated how few high school students were college-ready and served to catalyze support for the state’s efforts around alignment and developmental education reform.

There were also many examples of information ties that were two-way, in which the AD both provided information to stakeholders and received and used feedback from them. **Oregon**, for example, utilized this feedback process as it crafted and revised its definition of college readiness. A statewide task force developed the initial definition, which was reviewed and revised by cross-sector task forces and then further refined based on feedback collected from stakeholder surveys.

A smaller number of networks engaged in active collaboration among stakeholders to work toward specific change(s). For example, in **Washington**, a faculty work group developed Smarter Balanced policy recommendations that were then carried forward for endorsement to college deans, provosts, and presidents.

While information sharing, feedback, and collaboration were the three most persistently evident ties, another tie we observed was interaction based on *trust*. This was reflected in instances where individuals and entities placed trust in their AD when they were being asked to take on specific tasks. In **Louisiana**, trust was described as developing over time between the Board of Regents, institutions of higher education, and the Department of Education, allowing for relationships to continue even as particular individuals left. In **Washington**, trust between the higher education faculty members, administrators, and the AD enabled more ready involvement in the work. Trust is likely an important tie to support sustainability, particularly trust between organizations, not just individuals (who may leave their particular position).

Another tie that we observed through the survey responses was that of sharing and working toward a common purpose. Several respondents noted that developing relationships with their peers in other sectors helped them to understand that they all have a common purpose—serving students. As one community college faculty member in Hawaii noted: “The students are all of our students, one community that we serve. It makes sense to serve it together and not disparately.”

Cross-Sector Alignment Work

The interviews and surveys helped illuminate not only how and where the Core to College work had provided information and helped to develop connections between individuals and sectors, but also where these networks had gone further, making significant progress and/or reaching specific outcomes on their efforts. In **Hawaii**, survey respondents reported using the common definition of college, career, and community readiness that the network had created as a foundation for additional cross-sector work both between the state/ institutional level and across sectors at the local level. **Louisiana** and **North Carolina** survey respondents indicated that Core to College had a positive impact on teacher training as well as professional development work. Regional partnerships in **Colorado** have worked on vertical alignment of high school and gateway college courses.

In **Massachusetts**, several respondents noted that the AD’s emphasis on sharing information about the CCSS and the related assessments helps prepare them for making policy decisions about the use of PARCC assessments for placement in 2014/15.

Kentucky's Core to College work has focused on development of common learning outcomes for transition, developmental, and gateway courses. In **Washington**, local partnerships are helping to move towards specific curricular changes; as one university faculty member stated, "Core to College–related activities are essential to the success of my students in [my] programs. I have been able to build cross-sector K–12 and higher education relationships. [My university] is working with local feeder K–12 districts to begin to rethink and redesign our first year composition courses."

Challenges to Establishing and Sustaining Networks

Despite the positive headway made in the Core to College networks, our research also uncovered several challenges for the states in both establishing and sustaining these networks. Several of those challenges are highlighted below.

Collaborating effectively across sectors. Several survey respondents noted that cross-sector collaboration can be difficult in part because K–12 and higher education often “speak a different language” and take different approaches. Some states have had difficulty finding times to bring K–12 teachers to the table due to scheduling difficulties. ADs reported that some of their strategies worked better for one sector than another, and, in hindsight, realized it might have been better to vary approaches for different types of institutions. In **Louisiana**, for example, the strategy of working through the Chief Academic Officer or Dean was more successful at the four-year institutions than at the two-year institutions.

Identifying the proper key collaborators. Several of the ADs and others involved in Core to College noted that as the work has evolved, they have had to check to ensure that the right people continue to be involved in the conversations. In **Massachusetts**, for example, the AD notes that the PARCC campus contacts were initially selected based on whether they could recruit a team and bring some legitimacy to the project, but as the work changed, the AD now has to ensure that the campus point person is the right one to bring knowledgeable and interested faculty to the conversation. When **Massachusetts** was focused on establishing a definition of college readiness, it was important to have policymakers as well as higher education and K–12 leaders and faculty vet the definition. However, as the state is now moving toward examining placement policies, the AD is having to bring counselors and admissions representatives into the network.

Ensuring adequate reach. While all of the states have had some success in reaching out across sectors and providing opportunities for faculty and others to engage with one another around issues related to the CCSS, there is still work to be done to reach beyond those directly involved in the initiative. As a university faculty member in Tennessee noted, “To date, I don’t see any benefit to [my university] because so few people are even aware of Core to College work.”

Navigating the changing political environment. The changing political environment around support for CCSS has made the continued work of some of these networks more difficult. But, in many cases, the champions of Core to College have embraced this challenge, as evidenced by some of the survey responses. For instance, a staff member of the Louisiana Board of Regents noted, “My most important contribution, I think, has been in informal discussions with parents, visitors to the Board of Regents, and neighbors about Common Core and how publicity during the Session wasn’t telling the whole story.” And a staff member of the North Carolina Community College System stated, “The biggest

hurdle we face is the fluid legislative climate and the way the anti-Common Core folks have engaged on this issue.”

Dealing with AD turnover. The design of Core to College places one individual, the Alignment Director, at the center of the state’s efforts around this initiative. Thus, if that central leader leaves during the course of the grant, activities can come to a halt, get delayed, or change course. In over half of the Core to College states, there has been AD turnover at least once during the course of the grant. In some cases, like **Hawaii**, that turnover has been smooth, with seemingly little loss of momentum. Much of the success of Hawaii’s smooth transition can be attributed to the placement of the AD in the P–20 office, where cross-sector collaboration is ingrained in its day-to-day efforts and commitment to the Core to College goals is already embedded in its mission. In others states, the AD turnover led to a need to either reestablish or change network structures.

Sustaining the work beyond the life of the grant. The fact that the Core to College grant is ending just as states’ CCSS implementation is gaining full steam poses a potential challenge to the sustainability of the Core to College-related efforts. It is still too early for states to have the data necessary to make specific plans for use of CCSS-aligned assessments for placement, and our survey respondents expressed some concern that momentum of the Core to College work could be hard to sustain, particularly since the grants will end before higher education will really see any changes in its incoming students related to CCSS. As a staff member in the Oregon Department of Education noted, “Those [discussions around using the Smarter Balanced assessments for placement] are challenging discussions considering the fact that we don’t know everything we need to know about Smarter Balanced to make informed decisions.”

Interviewees and survey respondents expressed some concerns about how to continue Core to College activities once the grant resources and/or the AD were no longer available. Particularly in states with no central coordinating body, or where the AD was in the position only for the duration of the grant, the loss of the AD makes it unclear who will drive the efforts related to aligning K–12 and higher education systems around implementation of the CCSS and aligned assessments, and which sectors will have ownership of or responsibility to continue this work.

The state that has taken the most deliberate approach toward sustainability may be **Tennessee**, where the AD is now turning operation of the regional curriculum councils over to the eight Centers of Regional Excellence (CORE) representatives (who are funded by the Department of Education). These CORE leaders will receive Core to College mini-grant funding to continue the activities of the councils for one additional year, with the intention that they will continue to meet beyond that period. In **Colorado**, a law requiring P–20 collaboration could allow for the work to continue; in addition, the development of cross-sector data with agreed-upon data elements may contribute to potential sustainability of the efforts in the state.

The Core to College Cross-State Learning Network

In addition to the individual state networks described throughout this report, the Core to College initiative developed a cross-state network for the purpose of connecting Alignment Directors (ADs) throughout the course of the grant. The Core to College Learning Network was set up as an opportunity for the Core to College states to learn from and be resources for each other, with the goal of strengthening their work through this professional community. The Learning Network was facilitated by coaches from Education First and included monthly calls with the ADs and the Education First team, as well as individualized support from the coaches based on state requests. In addition, ADs convened twice a year to share best practices and discuss topics such as communication and dissemination, definitions of college and career readiness, stakeholder engagement, educator preparation, and sustainability. These convenings also included discussions with representatives from Smarter Balanced and PARCC, as well as opportunities for ADs to present problems of practice and receive feedback from the other ADs.

In this evaluation cycle, the ADs described how they have used the network to support their own work and how they have provided assistance to colleagues in other states. ADs in all states reported that the Learning Network has been beneficial to their work and many expressed that it provided high-value support as they worked to implement the Core to College goals.

There was a consensus among the ADs that the most valuable part of the network was the opportunity to share strategies. As John Denning, the former AD in North Carolina, said, the interstate networking was “valuable” because “this work is so unique, we’re trying to change systems while building capacity...It’s hard, complex work.” When Jeanne Burns, the AD in Louisiana, was faced with the need to develop a website, she immediately reached out to the network, and North Carolina in particular, to gain advice on the process. In addition, Oregon’s AD provided advice to Hawaii on how to transition to a new AD. Tennessee’s AD Melissa Stugart reached out to the network for advice on best practices for communications strategies. In addition, ADs shared information and lessons learned regarding transition courses, working with private institutions, and adapting specific documents for use in other states. In general, as Massachusetts AD Sue Lane commented, ADs found it helpful to connect with other states around a particular question, and legitimacy comes from knowing what states used.

The states that are part of the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (Smarter Balanced) also found value in the Learning Network by being able to share information and resources specifically related to their work with the Consortium. For instance, Denning reported that the ADs from the Smarter Balanced states “bonded,” and jokingly referred to themselves as the “Smarter Balanced Support Group.” These ADs set up calls, in addition

to the monthly Learning Network group calls, to support each other and share ideas. This Smarter Balanced–focused group gave the ADs the chance to talk about issues such as Smarter Balanced timelines, information, faculty recruitment, policy, and roll-out schedules. These states have continued to have email exchanges and discussions to share relevant information, resources, and advice.

Observations

Through this evaluation cycle, we have obtained a deeper understanding of the networks that were either developed or leveraged (or both) by the Core to College Alignment Directors (ADs). In addition to the challenges to developing and sustaining networks discussed above, the observations below summarize what we know at this point, in Year Three of the grant, about these networks. The actual long-term sustainability and efficacy of the network may not be evident for several years.

The networks are continuously evolving. There is a natural evolution to these networks, in part due to the readiness of the players to take action as well as to the relative time necessary for meeting different goals. As ADs shift their foci from one priority goal to another, or as strategies move from working with policy/decision-makers to working with practitioners, the network expands and shifts. In some cases, these networks are in flux or shifting because of changes in AD leadership.

The interactions of the Core to College networks are primarily based on information sharing and making connections between K–12 and higher education. Across the board, state strategies around Core to College priority goals focused primarily on informing and networking activities. While local and regional strategies also typically started with a focus on information dissemination and relationship building, they have begun to move more toward active collaboration focused on topics like course alignment, transition course development, and professional development. The strategies that seemed to lend themselves more to collaboration (as opposed to just information sharing) were faculty work groups, regional councils and, in some cases, statewide summits.

Information sharing and continued networking are critical to Core to College–related success. Respondents noted the importance—particularly for higher education—of learning more about CCSS and its potential impact on preparing students for college. The survey generated many responses about the value of information sharing, including the importance of working with others within and across systems, working with “people I have not worked with before,” and understanding interconnected goals across education sectors.

Higher education representatives have been heavily involved in Core to College. Approximately 70 percent of the key collaborators identified by ADs were from higher education, at either the state or local level. The nature of the goals of the initiative—defining college readiness, laying the groundwork for CCSS-aligned assessments for placement, and aligning K–12 and postsecondary efforts related to CCSS—may have led to the greater emphasis on the role of higher education representatives than that of K–12. In addition, because the majority of the ADs were situated within the state higher education system, engaging higher education representatives as core collaborators was likely the most natural place to begin.

Leveraging pre-existing networks or hubs may support greater potential for long-term, continuous sustainability. States that have been able to use previously established

cross-sector networks may be able to more easily continue the work of the Core to College initiative beyond the life of the grant because the entities involved are not dependent solely on the funds from this project. In finite initiatives like Core to College, the positioning and leadership of the project is significant. The system or department in which the AD is housed can impact the reach of the initiative, particularly the ability to make cross-sector connections. Alignment Directors who were positioned in a way that allowed Core to College work to be embedded within already-established efforts were able to leverage and build upon existing networks—thus giving the networks greater potential to remain in place even after the grant funding (and possibly the AD position) are gone.

New nodes were developed through field-based activities. Some ADs sought to develop new nodes in their network by fostering field-based pods of activity, like regional councils and faculty work groups. While survey respondents noted specific activities and accomplishments resulting from these efforts, it is still too early to tell what the long-term residual effects of these new nodes will be, and whether their work will continue once the Core to College resources are gone and there is no longer an AD to convene them.

Individual ADs found value in the cross-state network. The opportunity to learn from and share with colleagues in other states working on these same issues was very positive for the ADs. This sentiment was shared both by ADs who had been with the initiative since the outset and by new ADs who benefited from the wisdom of their colleagues in other states.

Considerations for the Future

The information gathered and analyzed during this evaluation cycle, and throughout the entire duration of the Core to College initiative, have led us to several considerations for the future of states' efforts. These considerations apply both to current Core to College states and other states looking to ensure that their higher education systems are engaged alongside their K–12 systems to prepare for the changes coming with the new Common Core State Standards.

Understanding network structures and potential points of leverage ahead of time are important for the success of an initiative like Core to College. While this report has described the networks that states used for this initiative, the most effective time for understanding these networks and their particular ties and nodes is at the *outset* of the new initiative. To differing degrees, at the start of the initiative the ADs did assess the existing connections and leverage points in their systems to determine the best strategies for meeting their Core to College goals. Future efforts like this might benefit from deliberate analysis of the pre-existing networks, the missing links, and the best strategies for disseminating information, gathering feedback, and collaborating with stakeholders to work toward transformation.

Cultivating activities in local nodes may be the most effective way to achieve and sustain goals. While statewide planning and networking was critical to the Core to College work, the activities at the local and regional level led to more tangible outcomes such as course alignment, transition course development, and implementation of teacher training and professional development. These localized efforts were a useful balance to system-wide policy discussions that often had longer timelines and more uncertain paths to navigate.

Ensuring the state is well situated to conduct the necessary validity studies for the CCSS-aligned assessments may be the most pressing issue for ADs in this last year of the Core to College initiative. As noted above, a common challenge for many Core to College states is that it is too early for them to be able to make policy changes with regard to the use of the CCSS-aligned assessments for placement. Over the next several months, it will be valuable to the success of the initiative for ADs to make a concerted effort to help ensure that the proper systems and resources are in place to conduct necessary validity and reliability studies of the new CCSS-aligned assessments.

The work cannot continue without designated resources, both monetary and personnel. There have been many successes resulting from the work of the ADs and their networks in each of the states. Funding and designated personnel will be critical to continuing moving this work forward. For example, to continue the momentum of the Core to College work, Tennessee has tasked its regional CORE directors with continuing to convene their regional councils.

The experiences of the Core to College states should be shared to help other states working toward achieving similar goals. Moving forward, the networks' efforts could be

leveraged by establishing an online resources library (which could include definitions of college and career readiness, examples of course alignment, and lessons learned from developing collaborative work groups) for all states seeking to make headway in this type of work.

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Appendix A. Survey responses

Table A1. Responses to the survey of key collaborators, by state

State	Number of collaborators identified	Number of surveys completed	Percentage of surveys completed
Colorado	9	6	67%
Hawaii	9	9	100%
Kentucky	7	4	57%
Louisiana	10	7	70%
Massachusetts	7	6	86%
North Carolina	7	5	71%
Oregon	14	10	71%
Tennessee	9	7	78%
Washington	10	8	80%
Total	82	62	76%

