

SMARTER BALANCED – FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

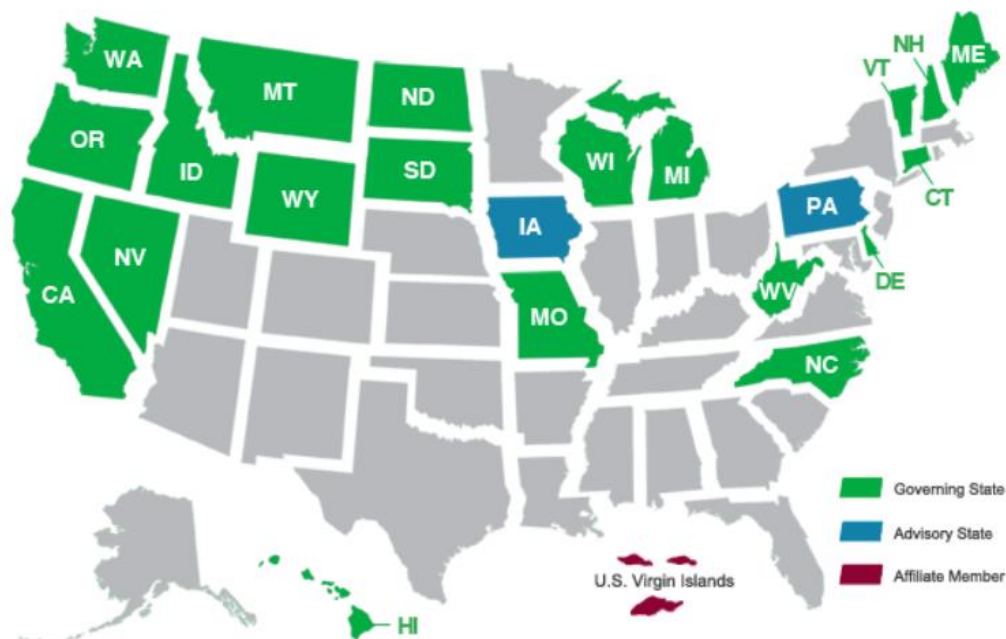
GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT SMARTER BALANCED

What is the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC)?

Smarter Balanced is a state-led consortium working together to develop assessments aligned to the [Common Core State Standards \(CCSS\)](#) that measure student progress toward college and career readiness. The Consortium involves educators, researchers, policymakers, and community groups in a consensus-driven process to help all students thrive in a knowledge-driven global economy. The assessments will provide educators, parents, and students with information they need to continuously improve teaching and learning and help ensure that students graduate college- and career-ready. The assessments are designed to meet the needs of all students, including English language learners and students with disabilities.

What states joined Smarter Balanced?

Smarter Balanced is a state-led consortium made up of 22 states and the US Virgin Islands. Those that join must adopt academic standards in English and math that are designed to ensure all students gain the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in college and the workplace and that are substantially identical to the standards adopted across all states in the Consortium.



How has the project been funded?

In 2010 the U.S. Education Department awarded \$330 million to two groups of states—the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium—to develop a valid, reliable, and fair system of next-generation assessments. The new tests assess students’ knowledge of math and English language arts (ELA) and literacy from third grade through high school. The process was led by governors and chief state school officers in more than 40 states. The Consortium’s projects were funded through a four-year, \$175 million grant from the U.S. Education Department and contributions of charitable foundations.

While federal funding supported the research and development work of the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, all policy decisions about the structure and content of the assessments are made by the member states based on input from stakeholders across the county. At the conclusion of the federal grant in

September 2014, Smarter Balanced became an operational assessment system supported by its member states and became an independent operating unit of UCLA's Graduate School of Education Graduate School of Education and Information Studies. The Consortium continues to be governed by its member states and is supported by member dues. The Consortium does not plan to seek more funds from the U.S. Education Department.

How is the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium different from PARCC?

Both Smarter Balanced and PARCC have developed assessment systems aligned to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in English and math. However, there are key differences between the two consortia. For example, Smarter Balanced assessments use computer adaptive technology, while PARCC uses computerized assessments that are not adaptive. For a summary of both design approaches, see [Coming Together to Raise Achievement: New Assessments for the Common Core State Standards](#), a white paper developed by Educational Testing Service.

What will happen when Smarter Balanced assessments are implemented in the 2014-15 school year?

As the new operating unit of the Smarter Balanced Consortium, UCLA provides access to faculty expertise and research support and offers a full array of administrative services that the Consortium requires after the federal grant ended in late 2014. Smarter Balanced continues to be a state-led organization. Ongoing development and continuous improvement will be funded and governed by the member states and territories.

ABOUT THE SMARTER BALANCED ASSESSMENT SYSTEM

What will the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium provide?

Smarter Balanced has developed a fair and reliable system of assessments for English and math for grades 3-8 and 11 aligned to the Common Core State Standards. These assessments replace existing tests in English and math for grades 3-8 and high school in the 2014-2015 school year. The assessments are administered online and provide an academic check-up to give teachers and parents better information to help students succeed.

The assessment system includes:

- **Digital Library** – an online collection of resources aligned to the Common Core that help teachers improve classroom-based assessment practices. The Library encourages collaboration and interaction and allows teachers to rate materials and share their classroom experiences through online discussions. The Digital Library is available now to teachers.
- **Optional interim assessments** to check student progress and provide information to help teachers plan and improve instruction. Schools will have two flexible administration options: Interim Comprehensive Assessments that mirror the year-end assessment; and **Interim Assessment Blocks** that focus on smaller sets of related standards and provide more detailed information for instructional purposes. The interim assessments become available in January 2015 and can then be used at any time during the school year.
- **Year-end summative assessments** describe both student achievement and growth of student learning in English and math. Summative assessments include a computer adaptive test as well as performance tasks that challenge students to apply their knowledge and skills to respond to real-world problems. The summative assessments will be administered in grades 3-8 and 11 beginning in spring 2015.

To learn more, [download a one-page overview](#) of the Smarter Balanced assessment system.

How is Smarter Balanced different from current assessments?

Smarter Balanced is a balanced, high-quality assessment system—including formative, interim, and summative components—can improve teaching and learning by providing information and tools for teachers and schools to help students succeed. Timely and meaningful assessment information offer specific information about

areas of performance so teachers can follow up with targeted instruction, students can better target their own efforts, and administrators and policymakers can more fully understand what students know and can do, in order to guide curriculum and professional development decisions.

Smarter Balanced assessments offer significant improvements over tests of the past, including writing at every grade, new question types, and performance tasks that ask students to demonstrate an array of research, writing, and problem solving skills. The assessments make use of computer adaptive technology to provide more accurate information about student achievement. Online assessments provide teachers, principals, and parents with results from end-of-year assessments in weeks, not months. Faster results also mean that teachers can quickly use the information from optional interim assessments to check student progress and plan instruction during the year. For more information, download the Smarter Balanced [Theory of Action](#).

How long will the assessments take to administer?

Smarter Balanced Governing States adopted the [preliminary summative test blueprints](#) in November 2012. The test blueprints include critical information about the number of items, score points, and depth of knowledge for items associated with each assessment target. Estimated testing times for most students are available in a supporting document, [Scoring Reporting and Estimated Testing Times](#). Smarter Balanced assessments are designed as untimed tests; some students may need and should be afforded more time.

Will students be able to retake the Smarter Balanced summative assessment?

Smarter Balanced will offer limited retake opportunities on the summative assessment when state officials determine that the test was administered under non-standard circumstances.

What will the assessments cost?

Smarter Balanced has released cost estimates for its assessments that include expenses for ongoing research and development of the assessment system, test administration, and scoring. The end-of-year summative assessment is estimated to cost \$22.50 per student. The full suite of summative and interim assessments and the Digital Library on formative assessment is estimated to cost \$27.30 per student. These costs are less than the amount that most Consortium member states currently pay. These costs are estimates because a sizable portion of the cost is for test administration and scoring services that will not be provided by Smarter Balanced; states will either provide these services directly or procure them from vendors in the private sector.

Will Smarter Balanced provide end-of-course assessments?

Smarter Balanced is not developing end-of-course assessments. The 11th grade summative assessment will provide evidence that students are college- and career-ready. However, member states can create end-of-course assessments using Smarter Balanced test questions.

Will results from Smarter Balanced assessments be comparable to assessments from other consortia?

Smarter Balanced is collaborating with PARCC to ensure there is comparability across the two assessments at the proficiency cut score for every grade. Both consortia will jointly engage with technical and policy advisors to study cross-consortia comparability.

How were the assessments tested before implementation in the 2014-15 school year?

Smarter Balanced has incrementally tested the content of the assessments and the technology that supports the assessments. Smarter Balanced completed a process that included:

- Cognitive Labs in 2012-13: Individual students provided feedback to test developers about their experience with the innovative test questions, accommodations for students with special needs, and the testing software.

- Small-scale Trials in 2012-13: Promising types of questions and software features were further tried out with hundreds of students.
- Pilot Test in spring 2013: More than 650,000 students at about 4,000 schools across the Consortium responded to a preliminary pool of test questions and performance tasks.
- Field Test in spring 2014: More than 4.2 million students in grades 3-8 and 11, including a small sample of students in grades 9 and 10, participated in the Field Test. This test was a full practice run of the assessment system to help ensure test questions are accurate and fair for all students. It also gave teachers and schools a chance to gauge their readiness before the first operational assessment in spring 2015.

Are sample Smarter Balanced assessment questions available?

Yes. The Smarter Balanced [Practice Test and the Training Test](#) provide students with an early look at sets of assessment questions.

- **Practice Tests** allow teachers, students, parents, and other interested parties to experience a full grade-level assessment and gain insight into how Smarter Balanced will assess students' mastery of the Common Core. The Practice Tests mirror the year-end assessment. Each grade level assessment includes a variety of question types and difficulty (approximately 30 items each in English and math) as well as an English and math performance task at each grade level (3–8 and 11). All language supports, including translated glossaries and stacked Spanish translation, are available on mathematics Practice and Training Tests.
- **Training Tests** are designed to provide students and teachers with opportunities to quickly familiarize themselves with the software and navigational tools that they will use on the spring 2015 assessments. The Training Test is organized by grade bands (grades 3 to 5, 6 to 8, and high school) and each test contains 14-15 questions. The questions on the Training Test were selected to provide students with an opportunity to practice a range of question types. The Training Tests do not contain performance tasks. Similar to the Practice Test, the Training Test includes all embedded universal tools, designated supports, and accommodations.

What is a performance task?

Performance tasks challenge students to apply their knowledge and skills to respond to real-world problems. They are best described as collections of questions and activities that are coherently connected to a single theme or scenario. The activities are meant to measure capacities such as depth of understanding, research skills, and complex analysis that cannot be assessed adequately with selected- or constructed-response items. Performance tasks in reading, writing, and math are part of the Smarter Balanced summative, year-end assessment. Performance tasks can also be administered as part of the optional interim assessments during the year. The performance tasks are delivered by computer (but are not computer adaptive) and take one to two class periods to complete. To view assessment questions and performance tasks, take a [Practice Test](#).

Do the assessments support English language learners, students with disabilities, and others with special needs?

The Smarter Balanced Assessment System provides accurate measures of achievement and growth for students with disabilities and English language learners. The assessments address visual, auditory, and physical access barrier, allowing virtually all students to demonstrate what they know and can do.

The [Usability, Accessibility, and Accommodations Guidelines](#) for the assessment system shape the delivery of online testing for all students, including those with visual, auditory, linguistic, or physical needs. The guidelines were developed in collaboration with member states and nationally recognized experts on English language learners and students with disabilities. The research-based policy outlines three categories of resources to

ensure that the assessments meet the needs of all students. The categories further distinguish between embedded tools included in the testing platform and non-embedded tools.

1. A set of universal accessibility tools—such as a digital notepad and scratch paper—are available to all students.
2. Designated supports—like translated pop-up glossaries in 11 languages—are available to students for whom a need has been identified by school personnel familiar with each student’s needs and testing resources.
3. Accommodations are available to students with a documented need noted in an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or 504 plan. These tools include Braille and closed captioning, among others.

For more information, see the [Accessibility and Accommodations factsheet](#) and the [Support for Under-Represented Students](#) page.

TECHNOLOGY & COMPUTER ADAPTIVE TESTING

How does computer adaptive testing (CAT) work?

The Smarter Balanced assessment system capitalizes on the precision and efficiency of computer adaptive testing (CAT) for both the mandatory summative assessment and the optional interim assessments. Computer adaptive testing continuously adjusts to a student’s ability by basing the difficulty of future questions on previous answers. For example, a student who answers a question correctly will receive a more challenging item, while an incorrect answer generates an easier question. For more information, see the separate document on computer adaptive testing on the district’s Assessment website.

In what ways is computer adaptive testing better than traditional paper-pencil testing?

CAT offers a number of advantages to traditional types of testing.

- **More accuracy:** By adapting to the student while the assessment takes place, the assessment presents an individually tailored set of questions to each student and quickly identifies which skills students have mastered. This provides more accurate measurement of student achievement, particularly for high and low-performing students. Teachers and schools then can more effectively evaluate student achievement and readiness for college and careers and measure a student’s growth over time.
- **More efficiency, security, and timely:** Computer adaptive tests are typically shorter than paper-and-pencil assessments because fewer questions are required to determine a student’s achievement level. The assessments draw from a large bank of questions, and since students receive different questions based on their responses, test items are more secure and can be used for a longer period of time. No test booklets need to be handled, secured, and coded with student information. CATs also allow teachers, principals, and parents to receive results in weeks, not months. Faster results mean that teachers can use the information from optional interim assessments throughout the school year to differentiate instruction and better meet the unique needs of their students.
- **Better information for teachers:** Optional computer adaptive interim assessments provide a more detailed picture of where students excel or need additional support, helping teachers to differentiate instruction. The interim assessments will be reported on the same scale as the summative assessment, and schools will have the flexibility to assess small elements of content or the full breadth of the Common Core State Standards at locally-determined times throughout the year.

Are paper-and-pencil versions of the assessment comparable with the computer adaptive test?

Smarter Balanced makes a paper-and-pencil version of the summative assessment available during a three-year transition period. Both the paper-and-pencil and computer adaptive tests follow the same test blueprint, meaning the same content areas and skills are assessed. Smarter Balanced conducts research to ensure that results are comparable across the two modes of assessment.

What are the technology requirements to administer the Smarter Balanced assessments?

The Technology Strategy Framework and System Requirements Specifications provide minimum hardware specifications and basic bandwidth calculations that allow schools and districts to evaluate which of their existing devices will support the administration of the assessments. Smarter Balanced estimates that the majority of schools and districts in member states can administer the assessments successfully with their existing infrastructure. For more information and to download the latest version of these specifications, visit the Smarter Balanced [Technology](#) page.

What if my school does not have the infrastructure to support computer adaptive testing?

The Smarter Balanced assessments are designed to work with the computing resources in schools today. The assessments can be offered on very old operating systems and require only the minimum processors and memory required to run the operating system itself (e.g., the summative assessment can be delivered using computers with 233 MHz processors and 128 MB RAM that run Windows XP). Likewise, the file size for individual assessment items is very small to minimize the network bandwidth necessary to deliver the assessment online. Nevertheless, a paper-and-pencil option is available for the first three years of testing.

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

What are the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and how are they related to Smarter Balanced?

The Common Core State Standards were developed voluntarily and cooperatively by 48 states and other US entities. They offer schools, teachers, students, and parents clear, understandable, and consistent standards in English and math. The Standards define the knowledge and skills students should take away from their K-12 schooling to be successfully prepared for postsecondary and career opportunities. More than 43 states adopted the Standards. The Smarter Balanced assessment system measures mastery of the Standards and provides timely information about student achievement and progress toward college and career readiness.

How do the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) define college- and career-readiness?

The writers of the CCSS included college and university faculty and began by defining the knowledge and skills in math and ELA/literacy that students need in order to be ready to succeed in entry-level credit-bearing coursework and the high-skill workforce. The standards writers consulted existing college readiness benchmarks, research on student academic preparation, surveys of business leaders, and content standards for top-performing states and countries. The standards-writers sought to create standards that are:

- Aligned with college and work expectations;
- Include rigorous content and application of knowledge through high-order skills;
- Build upon strengths and lessons of current state standards;
- Informed by top-performing countries, so that all students are prepared to succeed in our global economy and society; and
- Based on evidence and/or research.

The standards were vetted by faculty around the country, including panels convened by the American Council on Education in collaboration with leading scholarly societies. Once college and career readiness standards were agreed upon, standards writers created grade-level standards, “back-mapping” them to the college- and career-ready benchmarks. A survey of 1,800 faculty in a cross section of disciplines at a diverse set of institutions found substantial agreement that the CCSS define the knowledge and skills that students need to be ready for entry-level course work.

A coalition of states is developing science standards. Will science be included in the assessment system?

Smarter Balanced does not include science assessments in the 2014-15 school year. However, the online test delivery options selected by states (or the Consortium) support the delivery of online science assessments in

the future, particularly in cases where the science assessments are comprised of selected-response items. Smarter Balanced will monitor the development and adoption of the Next Generation Science Standards being developed by a partnership that includes The National Research Council, the National Science Teachers Association, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and Achieve. For more information, visit <http://www.nextgenscience.org>.

Does a shared assessment system require a shared or common curriculum?

No. Curriculum decisions are best made by educators at the local and state levels. States participating in the Consortium can access professional development materials and instructional resources for teachers through the Digital Library. These tools are optional and can be used, as needed, to complement state curriculum supports to districts and teachers.

To what extent will the assessments measure 21st-century skills?

The Smarter Balanced assessments measure the full depth and breadth of the Common Core State Standards in English and math. The authors of the Standards focused on the cognitive skills and knowledge that students need to be ready to succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing, academic college courses and in workforce training programs. Critical-thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills are a major focus in the standards. Through innovative items and performance tasks, Smarter Balanced assessments measure these important skills. However, the Common Core authors note that the standards do not encompass everything a student should learn or describe all the skills students need in the 21st century. Academic readiness defined by the Common Core is only part of a more comprehensive set of knowledge and skills that contribute to college and career readiness, such as work habits, persistence, and postsecondary planning.

How were teachers involved in creating the Smarter Balanced assessment system?

Smarter Balanced engaged teachers in the development of the assessment system in the following ways:

- Smarter Balanced collaborated with more than 500 educators across the Consortium in the development of the interim and summative assessments. These teachers, recruited by member states, wrote test questions and participated in reviewing questions for content, bias/sensitivity, and accessibility.
- The Digital Library of instructional and professional learning resources for formative assessment was developed by educators for educators. Nearly 2,000 educators representing State Leadership Teams (SLTs) and State Networks of Educators (SNEs) are building this online collection of CCSS-aligned resources to support educators in improving teaching and learning.
- Thousands of teachers participated in the achievement level setting process (see below) in fall 2014.

ACHIEVEMENT LEVELS

What are achievement levels?

The Smarter Balanced Consortium established four general achievement levels of performance (Level 1-4) for both English language arts/literacy and math at each grade level. The levels are based on what score is needed to be ready to enter college. Level 1 is the lowest level and Level 3 is meeting standard (proficient). A score at or above Level 3 in 11th grade is meant to provide “conditional evidence of readiness for entry-level, transferable, credit-bearing college courses.”

How will scores be reported?

Student scores will be reported on a scale from 2000 to 3000, and the score needed to be proficient increases as the grade level increase. This allows students, parents, and educators to measure student growth in each subject over time. The student score as well as the overall achievement level will appear on score reports for assessments administered in spring 2015.

How were the achievement levels established?

Achievement Level Setting, also known as standard setting, is the process for establishing one or more cut scores on an assessment, making it possible to create categories of performance. The process had several phases that took place in fall 2014, and it included hundreds of teachers, school leaders, higher education faculty, parents, and business and community leaders participating in a series of panels and committees. More than 3,000 people were involved in a complex process to determine the four achievement levels, and more than 900 teachers from Washington participated. Member states met in November 2014 to review and endorse achievement level recommendations. Each member state must adopt the recommendations.

What are achievement levels descriptors (ALDs)?

ALDs are text statements that articulate the knowledge, skills, and abilities represented at different categories of performance on the Smarter Balanced assessments, including the college- and career-ready category for the high school assessment. They describe how students are progressing toward mastery of the Common Core State Standards and provide clear explanations of student performance for policymakers, educators, and parents. ALDs are linked to an operational definition of college content-readiness as well as a policy framework to guide score interpretation for high schools and colleges.

We hear that score results will drop dramatically. Does this mean students and schools are failing or doing worse than before?

No. Because the Common Core standards set higher expectations for students and the new tests are designed to assess college and career readiness, the expectations for student achievement are now higher than they used to be and “passing the test” will be more difficult. As a result, fewer students will score at the higher achievement levels, especially for the first few years. Results should improve as students have more years of instruction based on the new standards. Moreover, the new set of results provide a more accurate measure of where students are on the path to success based on the higher standards we set to ensure that students are challenged and prepared to compete nationally and globally.

HIGHER EDUCATION

How is the higher education community involved in Smarter Balanced?

Collaboration with higher education is critical to achieving the goal of preparing students to enter college and the workforce. Representatives from higher education are involved in key design decisions—with the goal that colleges and universities across Smarter Balanced member states will accept passing assessment results as evidence that high school students are ready for entry-level, credit-bearing coursework. Each member state appointed a higher education leader to provide input in the development of the assessment system and to coordinate outreach to higher education institutions. In addition, two higher education leaders hold seats on the Executive Committee and higher education representatives serve on Consortium work groups.

How does Smarter Balanced define college- and career-readiness?

Smarter Balanced developed assessments aligned to the full depth and breadth of the Common Core State Standards. Through its member states and in consultation with the lead writers of the CCSS and other national education experts, Smarter Balanced translated the standards into assessment targets, test blueprints, and assessment items and performance tasks. The Consortium also established performance benchmarks that define the level of content and skill mastery that marks a student as being on track to college- and career-readiness at each grade level. These performance benchmarks were determined through a deliberative and evidence-based Achievement Level Setting process, which included input from K-12 educators and college-level faculty.

Will Smarter Balanced assessments replace the SAT and ACT?

No. The 11th grade summative assessment is not a college admissions test. Rather, it helps students and institutions of higher education gauge which students leave high school with the English and math knowledge and skills necessary for entry-level, transferable, credit-bearing work. That is a different issue than whether or not students should be admitted. Colleges and universities often admit students who are not immediately ready for credit-bearing coursework, and they vary in how much they rely upon the SAT and ACT and in the scores they expect students to meet. Smarter Balanced is coordinating with member states to determine how Smarter Balanced results can most effectively be reported to the colleges and universities students choose.

Is the Smarter Balanced summative assessment designed for use in college admissions?

No. The Smarter Balanced assessments are not designed to serve the function of admission examinations. Use of Smarter Balanced assessment scores in admission decisions is a policy decision for higher education systems and institutions, but Smarter Balanced is not designing its assessments for this purpose.

How will the performance standard be set for defining college- and career-readiness?

College and university faculty played an active role in establishing college- and career-ready standards for the 11th grade assessment. In addition to expert judgment from K-12 teachers and higher education faculty, Smarter Balanced used multiple sources of empirical data to guide the setting of performance standards. These included international and national benchmarks such as PISA, TIMSS, NAEP, SAT and ACT, and information about student performance in high school and subsequent postsecondary success from state-level longitudinal data systems.

Will performance on the Smarter Balanced assessment have any impact on students' college experience?

Yes. The Smarter Balanced states agreed on a College Content-readiness Policy that guarantees exemption from developmental coursework to students who perform at an agreed-upon level on the grade 11 summative assessment and meet state requirements set jointly by K-12 and higher education for grade 12 course taking and performance. Colleges and universities in the Smarter Balanced states will be asked to agree to abide by this policy beginning with students who enter college in fall 2016. To help colleges and universities make this decision, Smarter Balanced will provide information on how scores on the grade 11 assessment compare to scores on commonly used admission and placement examinations and will conduct studies of predictive and consequential validity.

How will Smarter Balanced validate its college- and career-readiness benchmark?

A substantial research program has been designed to validate and make adjustments to the college- and career-ready standard after administration begins in 2014-15. It is anticipated that the initial college- and career-ready benchmark will be predictive of student performance in the first year of college. Nonetheless, it will be important to validate the standard and make any necessary adjustments once postsecondary performance data are available for students who have taken the Smarter Balanced assessments.

Why are the tests measuring college preparedness when college isn't right for everyone?

To be ready for success after high school, all students need to master skills such as critical thinking, analytical writing, and problem solving. Smarter Balanced assessments have been specifically developed to measure these real-world skills that students will need when they graduate, whether they are headed into a traditional degree program or postsecondary career training.

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