Common Core State Standards: 
Major Features and Advancements

States have been developing their own academic standards for years. But in many instances, state standards devolved into long lists of the knowledge and skills that educators and content experts could agree on. To cover all the material in such standards, teachers were forced to rush students through a wide array of disparate content, with insufficient attention to connecting the knowledge or to building the higher-order communication, research, and problem-solving skills fundamental to postsecondary and workplace success. The framers of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), who included college and university faculty, wanted students to learn fewer core concepts in greater depth—a formula for challenging them academically, promoting deeper understanding, and enabling students to apply what they have learned.

The K-12 and higher education faculty who developed the CCSS also wanted to create a set of common standards that, first, would allow states to benchmark themselves not only against each other but against some of the highest-performing nations in the world and that, second, would provide actionable guidance to teachers, help them connect student learning from one grade to the next, and build essential skills. But perhaps most important for higher education, the framers wanted to ground the CCSS in evidence on the most crucial knowledge and skills for postsecondary success.

That evidence was drawn from scholarly research, surveys of faculty and employers, data from assessments such as the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), Program of International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), and comparisons to standards from high-performing states and nations. The standards were further informed by input that higher education faculty submitted as individuals, as part of state review teams, and through committees organized by national scholarly organizations.

To help the standard writers stay true to these objectives, they developed a mantra to which they returned throughout their work: fewer, clearer, higher, and deeper.

Because of the standard-writers’ objectives and the evidence and expert opinion they collected, the CCSS make a number of key advances in addressing the knowledge and skills that faculty hope to see in their incoming students. In ELA/literacy, for instance, the standards ask that students read a balance of fiction and literary non-fiction—the latter a genre that is often absent from high school curricula but that forms the backbone of college coursework—and they ask social studies, science, career-technical, and other subject matter teachers to teach literacy in their content areas. The

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2 For more information on the Common Core State Standards, and to download the standards documents, visit www.corestandards.org.
ELA/literacy standards also seek to build through the grades students’ ability to read and understand increasingly complex texts, since many students struggle with the reading demands of college coursework.

College students are also expected to identify areas for research and to evaluate and synthesize that research, a skill that college and university faculty expect students to have mastered prior to matriculation. So the CCSS standards ask students to conduct short, focused projects and in-depth research; gather relevant, credible information from multiple print and digital sources; produce clear and coherent writing; and communicate research findings verbally, as well as in writing.

The speaking and listening standards, adopted in part at the request of higher education faculty, emphasize the type of academic discourse that occurs in college one-on-one, in small groups, and in classroom settings. Students must be able to clearly describe complex topics, marshal evidence, and construct logical and compelling arguments.

The mathematics standards stress focus, coherence, clarity, and rigor. They ask teachers to concentrate on a smaller set of topics in each grade so that students can gain solid conceptual understanding, a high degree of procedural skill and fluency, and the ability to apply the math they know to problems inside and outside the classroom.

The standards present a coherent progression from grade to grade, asking students to deepen their knowledge of core topics and expand their ability to apply their conceptual understanding to increasingly challenging real-world problems. The rigor of the standards is manifested primarily in heightened expectations that students demonstrate fluency in their understanding and use of mathematical concepts and procedures, solve real-world problems using that knowledge, create mathematical models, and explain and defend their reasoning (for more information, see www.corestandards.org).

No standards are perfect, and educators may disagree with aspects of the CCSS. But when researchers at the Educational Policy Improvement Center surveyed a nationally representative sample of more than 1800 college and university faculty who teach introductory courses in 25 categories about the applicability and importance of the standards to the courses they teach, the results indicated an extraordinary level of consensus. For example, almost all (96 percent) respondents thought that the ELA/literacy standards were sufficiently rigorous, and 84 percent reported that the standards were a coherent representation of the knowledge and skills necessary for success in their courses (Conley et al., 2011).

Reference
The Common Core State Standards: What They Are Not

With a new initiative as large and complex as the CCSS, confusion is inevitable. It is just as important to understand what the standards are not as what they are. They are:

- NOT a federal initiative. The standards were developed by states under the leadership of the National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers. States participated voluntarily in their development. The federal government is funding the state-led consortia engaged in the development of new assessments linked to the Common Core State Standards, but adoption of either the CCSS or related assessments is voluntary.

- NOT a national curriculum. The CCSS provide a common set of goals, but states, districts, schools, and teachers will continue to determine how to meet those goals. With the exception of a few documents core to America’s democracy, the CCSS does not mandate the use of any particular texts.

- NOT a panacea that will solve all the problems in K-12 education. Standards are an important foundation, but they are meaningless without effective implementation, which requires excellent instruction and curricula as well as strong school leadership.

- NOT an attempt to remove literature and the traditional math sequence from high schools. The CCSS seek a balance between the reading of fiction and informational texts, but they in no way abandon the study of great literature as a means to engender a love of reading, aesthetic appreciation, and excellent communication skills. The math standards are written so that they support a coherent progression of learning whether a school follows an integrated or traditional math course sequence.

- NOT an excuse for more standardized testing. The new tests being designed to assess student progress toward college and career readiness are intended to replace—not add to—existing tests in mathematics and ELA/literacy. Further, due to the pooling of state expertise and the federal support for test development, these new assessments will encompass state-of-the-art measurement techniques that will provide a more authentic assessment of student readiness than states can presently achieve on their own. Students will encounter new item types, computer-enhanced items, many more constructed-response items, and performance tasks that ask them to use a broad array of knowledge and skills to solve complex real-world problems.