

**COLLEGE & CAREER
READINESS & SUCCESS** Center

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● **DEFINITIONS OF COLLEGE
AND CAREER READINESS:
AN ANALYSIS BY STATE**

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Definitions of College and Career Readiness: An Analysis by State

Anne Mishkind

Across the nation, state education leaders are developing definitions of “college and career readiness.” Although preparing students for postgraduation opportunities has long been a priority for states, districts, and schools, economic and demographic shifts mean that the number of low-skilled jobs is shrinking, even while many employers struggle to find qualified workers to fill their middle-and high-level jobs. Therefore, it is imperative that all graduates have the knowledge and skills to participate in college or workforce training programs that will prepare them for the higher skill jobs of today and tomorrow.

In 2011, the federal government offered waivers to states to provide an avenue for flexibility from certain requirements of the 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). This effort is known as ESEA flexibility. To receive ESEA flexibility, states had to implement “college- and career-ready” standards. The resulting widespread adoption of the Common Core State Standards or other similar standards in English language arts and mathematics furthered the conversation about what knowledge, skills, and dispositions are most needed for postsecondary success. Although reading and mathematics have been the chief focus of the standards so far, science and social studies standards are being adopted and discussed in a growing number of states, and higher expectations for critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaborative skills have accompanied the new standards’ increased content rigor. College and career readiness definitions can serve—much like mission or vision statements—as a touchstone by which to judge the success of policies and initiatives in achieving well-defined, shared goals. In addition, they can play an essential role in helping states broaden their overarching vision for college and career readiness to ensure that students receive the multidimensional preparation necessary for success in the global economy.

Definitions in Detail

Today, 36 states and the District of Columbia¹ have definitions of college and career readiness, while 15 states, as well as Puerto Rico, have no definition or are juggling multiple definitions.² Each Bureau of Indian Education school assumes the definition of the state in which it is located. State definitions range from a single short sentence to extensive multipage documents that include key competencies and indicators.

The College and Career Readiness and Success (CCRS) Center’s analysis breaks these 37 definitions down into 10 categories with potential impact on college and career readiness.

¹ In the text that follows, D.C. will be included in the state definition count, bringing it to 37.

² This information was gathered from state documents, state websites, and ESEA flexibility requests.

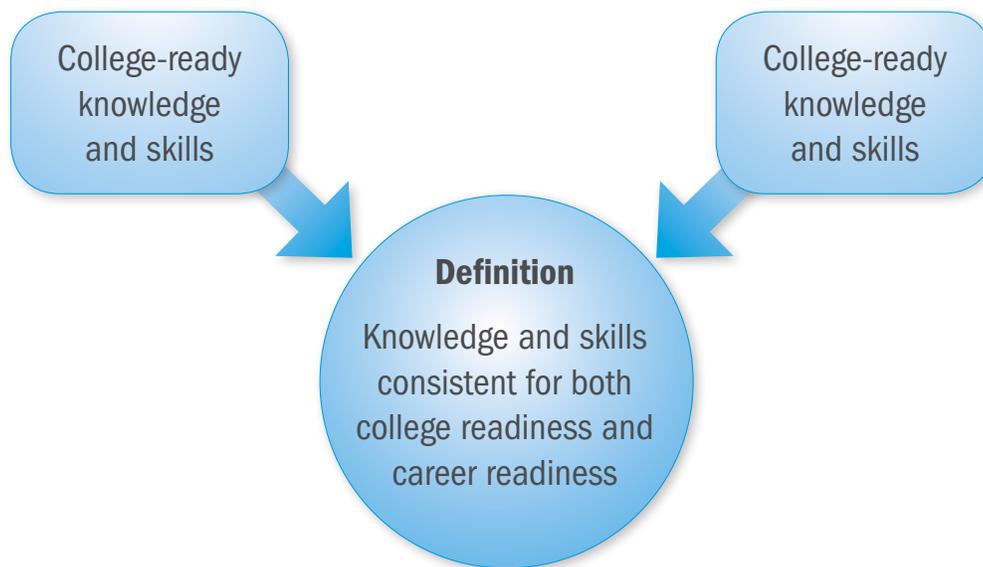
How can a college and career readiness definition be used? Example from the Oregon Education Investment Board (2014, p. 132):

- Strategic planning at local, regional, and state levels to address achievement gaps and increase college readiness
- Communications planning
- Student, family, and community awareness and engagement
- Cross-sector vertical and horizontal educational alignment
- High school reform and 12th-grade redesign
- Grades 11–14 model
- Postsecondary placement and developmental education reform
- Assessment
- Data collection and analysis

OVERVIEW CATEGORIES

► Same/different definitions for college readiness and career readiness

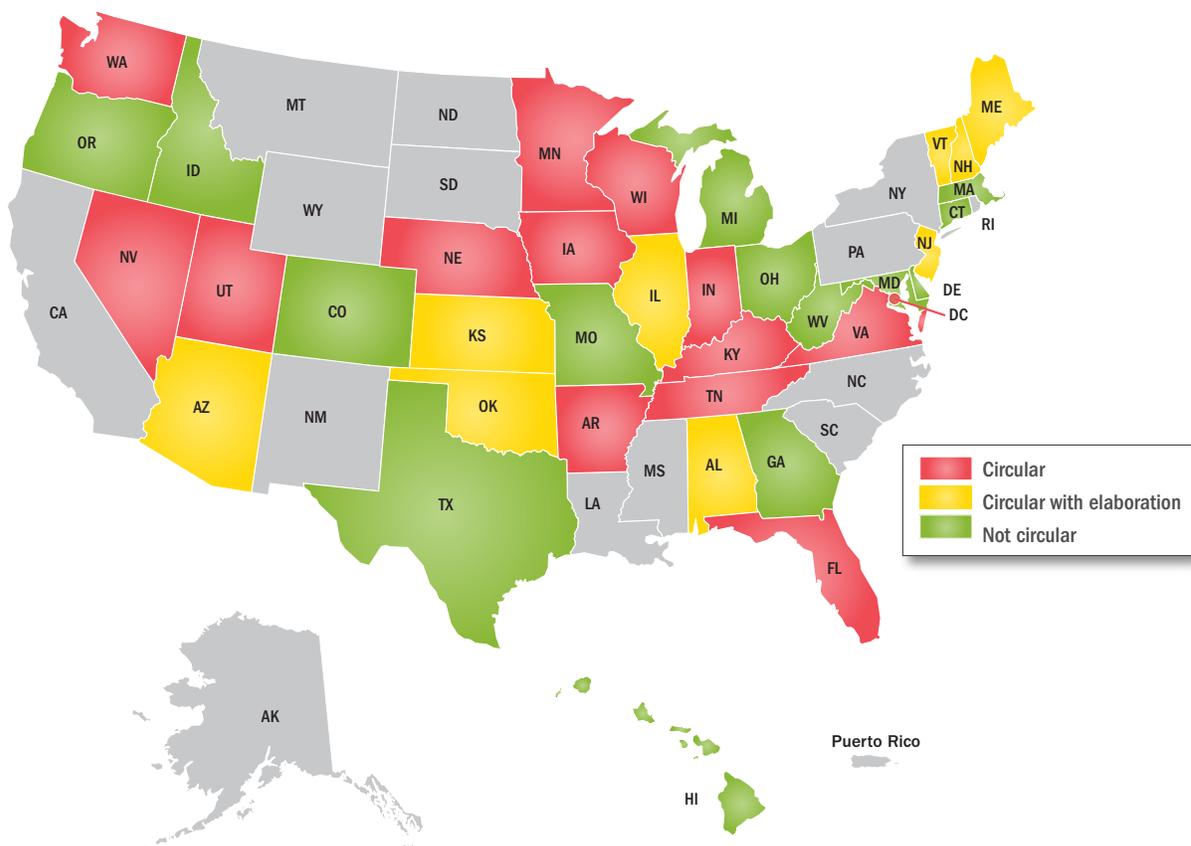
In 33 of the 37 states with definitions, one definition is used to describe both college readiness and career readiness. The Oregon Investment Education Board reports that having one definition for both terms “helps to break down the ‘silos’ in which education and workforce sectors often operate,” adding “significant research has shown that although the knowledge, skills, and applications of learning required for success in particular fields and programs of study vary, *the overarching skills and strategies required for students of all ages entering colleges and careers are consistent*” (Oregon Investment Education Board, 2014).³ Similarly, states such as New Hampshire have a single, shared definition of college and career readiness that differentiates between college readiness and career readiness, while emphasizing the overlap in knowledge and skills necessary for success in each area. New Hampshire’s ESEA flexibility request (2013) states, “Evidence and experience indicate that the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in college and career are greatly similar, and that all graduates will need some form of postsecondary education or training to succeed during their careers.” In the four states that define college readiness and career readiness separately, most have developed a definition for college *or* career readiness rather than both.



³ Emphasis added.

► Circular definitions

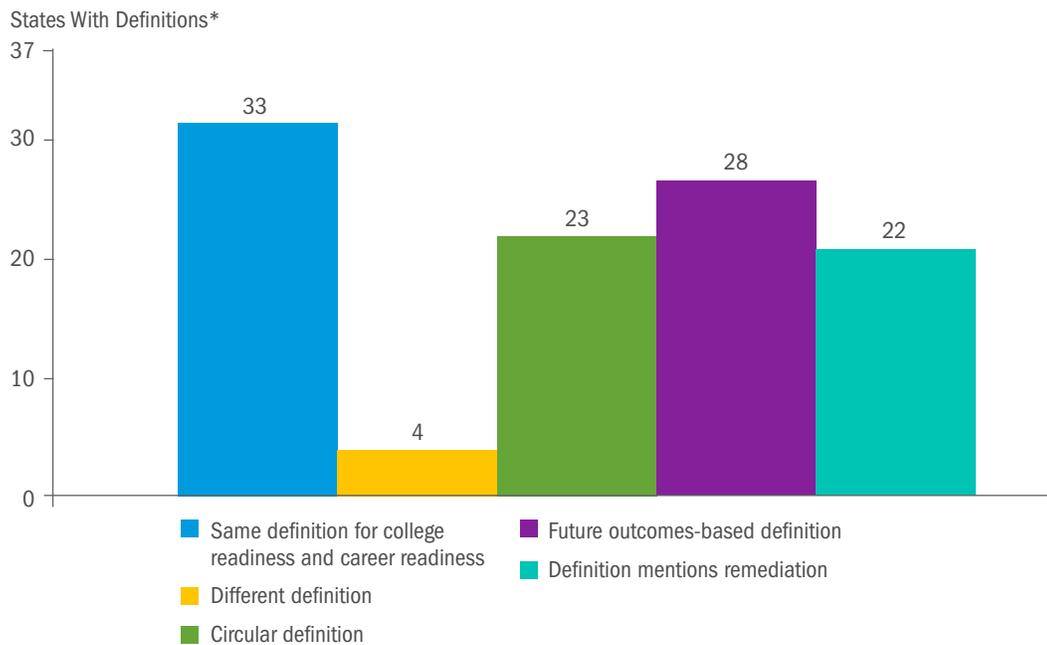
More than half of the 37 definitions of college and career readiness are circular. For example, Utah and 13 other states use some variation of the following: “A college- and career-ready student is prepared to succeed in college and postsecondary workforce training programs” (Utah State Office of Education and Utah System of Higher Education, 2012). Nine other states have definitions that, although repetitious at their core, elaborate somewhat on the tautological foundation. For example, Vermont’s definition reads, “*College and career readiness* means the student’s ability to enter the workforce or pursue post-secondary education or training without the need for remediation. The student must possess the foundational skills and learning strategies necessary to begin studies in a career pathway in order to be considered college and career ready” (Vermont Agency of Education, 2013). There is reference to “foundational skills” and “learning strategies” with little guidance as to what is expected from students, teachers, and administrators.⁴ We will explore some of these definitions further in the “actionable categories” below.



⁴ This definition is connected to Vermont’s Education Quality Standards (2013) that provide more detailed and extensive guidance on readiness expectations.

► **Mentions remediation**

Twenty-two states specifically mention postsecondary “remediation” in their definitions of preparedness. Although this metric is similar to future outcomes as discussed above—in both cases, readiness is not determined until after high school graduation—it nonetheless warrants distinct categories. For Iowa, “college and career ready means the acquisition of the knowledge and skills a student needs to enroll and succeed in credit-bearing first-year courses at a postsecondary institution without the need for remediation” (Iowa ESEA flexibility request, 2012).⁵ Not only does this definition present the same challenges as those premised on future outcomes, but it also establishes institutions of higher education—not the K–12 education system—as the arbiters of readiness. This is problematic because it assumes that colleges have developed valid metrics to assess students’ knowledge and skills. Practices such as those stated in Florida’s Senate Bill 1720, which allow students to decide for themselves whether remedial coursework is necessary, demonstrate that this is not always the case.



*Includes D.C.

⁵ Iowa’s waiver is currently under review.

Actionable Categories

Definitions with actionable categories provide concrete information that can be used by districts and schools to develop their college- and career-ready programs. Concrete actions that schools and teachers can put into practice fit into six categories:

1. Academic knowledge
2. Critical thinking/problem solving
3. Social and emotional learning/collaboration
4. Grit/resilience/perseverance
5. Citizenship/community involvement
6. Other additional activities

Twenty-one states' definitions of "college and career ready" include actionable items; more than half of the 21 states include at least four of the six categories. The remaining 15 of 37 definitions do not include any actionable categories.

▶ Academic knowledge

Nineteen states require some form of "content knowledge" for students to be considered college and career ready. Nine definitions include specific mention of English, mathematics, or both, and two call for knowledge in "core" subjects.

▶ Critical thinking and/or problem solving

Fourteen states' definitions require students to demonstrate critical thinking and/or problem-solving skills to be deemed college and career ready.

▶ Social and emotional learning, collaboration, and/or communication

Fourteen states' definitions require students to demonstrate collaboration, communication, and/or social and emotional learning skills. Twelve of these 14 also require critical thinking and/or problem-solving skills.⁶

▶ Grit/resilience/perseverance

One of the more controversial categories on this list, the term "grit," has recently gained favor in a number of states. The term grit was first used in an education context by Angela Duckworth (2007), but the concept of resilience or perseverance has long sparked debate about the teachability of this important trait. Sometimes called "readiness behaviors," grit, resilience, and/or perseverance are included in eight definitions of college and career readiness.

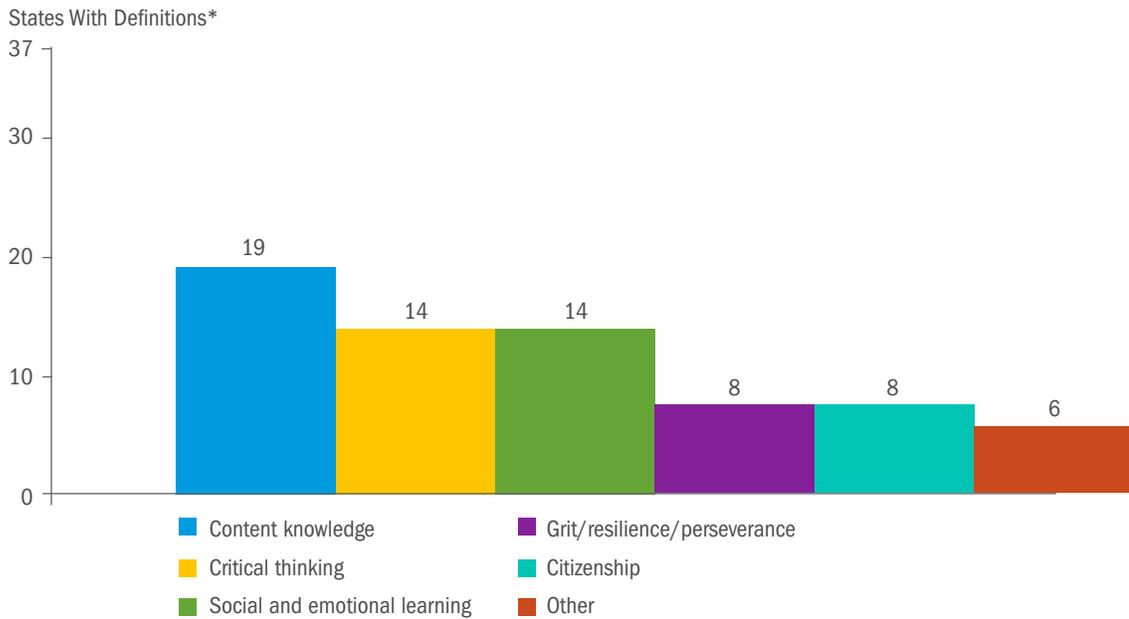
▶ Citizenship and/or community involvement

A third dimension—citizenship—is added to readiness definitions in eight states. Although Oklahoma has renamed its definition "College, Career, and Citizen Ready" (C3 for short), the other seven states highlight the importance of preparation for informed civic participation for full postsecondary success.

⁶ New Hampshire and West Virginia require social and emotional learning but not critical thinking. Missouri and Vermont require critical thinking but not social and emotional learning.

► **Other additional activities**

Only six of 37 states mention an actionable item outside of the five categories above. Of these six states, two include knowledge of technology, three include lifelong learning, and one highlights responsibility to family—past, present, and future generations.



*Includes D.C.

Conclusion

An analysis of state college and career readiness definitions yields insight into state priorities and nationwide trends. From detailed definitions, such as those of Hawaii, Massachusetts, and Oregon, to more minimal definitions, including those of Arkansas, Florida, and Indiana, it is clear that the process of defining college and career readiness is unique to each state's population, priorities, and political context. However, to understand the full range of what states are doing to prepare their students for college and careers, it is essential to look beyond definitions. Most of the important work that states do to increase rigor and ensure postgraduation success is reflected in their standards. Although many states have adopted the Common Core State Standards, some are supplementing these standards with their own. For example, Massachusetts is implementing the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks, which include the Common Core, and will continue to follow the MassCore-recommended course of study (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, 2013). Still others, such as Indiana and South Carolina, have opted out of the Common Core and will develop their own college- and career-ready standards. Most states have adopted either the Common Career Technical Core standards or local career and technical education standards. Other states, such as Illinois, have created social and emotional learning standards, demonstrating that they also are working to guide students' preparation for college and career beyond the academic classroom. In addition, state policy and programmatic strategies must be examined to develop a full understanding of all that states are doing to support their students. Definitions provide states with an important touchstone, but are only one piece of ensuring college and career readiness for all high school graduates.

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1000 Thomas Jefferson Street NW
Washington, DC 20007-3835
800.634.0503

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