

# The Condition of College & Career Readiness 2015

Students from  
Low-Income Families

**ACT**<sup>®</sup>



NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR  
Community and Education  
Partnerships





February 2016

Dear Colleagues,

You're reading this report because, like us, you have a deep commitment to enabling educational success for all students. While that commitment continues to intensify, the fundamental dynamics facing students from low-income families are decades old, matched with slow progress on a national scale.

Low-income students face a sadly familiar educational landscape: nearly all have postsecondary aspirations; some are quite successful, but most trail their peers academically; and many communities and schools in which they live and learn face broad and seemingly intractable challenges.

Our report confirms this story for the 440,000 students from low-income families in the ACT-tested high school class of 2015. Ninety-six percent aspire to earn some postsecondary degree, yet the percentage of such students meeting at least three ACT College Readiness Benchmarks has been low and flat for the past five years. More alarmingly, half of the students didn't meet a single Benchmark. We cannot expect better results without doing some things differently.

More targeted and effective solutions across the K–12-to-postsecondary continuum are needed to support low-income students. Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) is one such solution. In addition to its early college awareness, academic readiness, financial education, and college scholarships components, GEAR UP catalyzes evidence-driven solutions to the challenges addressed in this report. GEAR UP is an example of how a research-based partnership among secondary, postsecondary, state and local business, and community entities can be a powerful vehicle to deliver key research-based interventions to low-income families early and consistently on their path to postsecondary education.

Given our shared mission and commitment to evidence and partnerships, ACT and the National Council for Community and Education Partnerships (NCCEP) joined with 13 GEAR UP state grantees to form the College and Career Readiness Evaluation Consortium—an ambitious, multiyear project to examine which interventions are most effective in attaining educational outcomes from the middle grades to college. Throughout the next several years, we will share what we learn with you to spur dialogue and take action on educational practice and policy.

We know that your commitment to students from low-income families extends beyond a professional interest; it's also personal, deep, and moral. It is for us, too. This commitment is reflected in our organizations' missions and, more importantly, in our actions. We invite you to join us in mobilizing around this critical challenge.

**Jim Larimore**

Chief Officer for the Advancement  
of Underserved Learners  
ACT

**Ranjit Sidhu**

President and CEO  
National Council for Community and  
Education Partnerships (NCCEP)

# Students from Low-Income Families

## The Condition of College & Career Readiness 2015

*The Condition of College & Career Readiness 2015* is the ACT annual report on the progress of US high school graduates relative to college readiness. This year's report shows that 59% of students in the 2015 US graduating class took the ACT® test, up from 57% last year and 49% in 2011. The increased number of test takers over the past several years enhances the breadth and depth of the data pool, providing a comprehensive picture of the current graduating class in the context of college readiness as well as offering a glimpse at the emerging educational pipeline.

### *The ACT: Now More Than Ever*

ACT has a longstanding commitment to improving college and career readiness. Through our research, our thought leadership, and our solutions, we seek to raise awareness of issues and best practices aimed at helping individuals achieve education and workplace success. As the landscape of education and assessment rapidly shifts and state education and economic development agendas converge, ACT is uniquely positioned to inform decisions at the individual, institutional, system, and agency levels.

As a research-based nonprofit organization, ACT is committed to providing information and solutions to support the following:

- **Holistic View of Readiness.** Our research shows that the ACT College and Career Readiness Standards can help prepare students for college and career success. However, we understand that academic readiness is just one of several factors that contribute to educational success. One 2014 ACT report, *Broadening the Definition of College and Career Readiness: A Holistic Approach*, shows academic readiness—long the sole focus of monitoring college readiness—as one of four critical domains in determining an individual's readiness for success in college and career. Crosscutting skills, behavioral skills, and the ability to navigate future pathways are also important factors to measure and address. Together, these elements define a clear picture of student readiness for postsecondary education. To encourage progress, the educational system needs to monitor and sustain all key factors of success.
- **Stability and Validity of Data.** ACT is committed to maintaining the integrity and credibility of the 1–36 score scale, a scale that is familiar to and valued by the many stakeholders served by ACT. Leveraging the power of longitudinal data means avoiding dramatic shifts in the reporting structure.
- **Promoting Access.** Serving the needs of our many stakeholders is a focal point for ACT. We will continue to explore ways to expand college access for all students, promoting initiatives to better meet the needs of underserved learners and developing solutions and

services that make a difference in the lives of those we serve. Through new avenues such as online testing, initiating campaigns targeted at underserved students, and supporting organizations aligned with our mission, ACT is working to reach and help a greater number of individuals.

- **Continuous Improvement Without the Need for Radical Change.** ACT is committed to providing a wider range of solutions, across a broader span of life's decision points, in an increasingly individualized manner so that all can benefit. This has led us to a mode of continuous improvement. However, our goal is to avoid radical change so as to assist our users with transition. Our research agenda takes into account the changes in education and workplace practice and the demographics and evolving needs of those we serve. Accordingly, when research and evidence dictate, we will continue to make necessary changes in our recommendations and/or solutions, including discontinuing outdated programs and services, to bring clarity to the market.
- **Providing Meaningful Data for Better Decisions.** ACT is focused on providing better data to students, parents, schools, districts, and states so that *all* can make more informed decisions to improve outcomes. We accomplish this goal by taking a holistic view and using consistent and reliable historical information, so that individuals and institutions have a better context to make critical decisions about the journey they have undertaken.

### *Using This Report<sup>1</sup>*

This report is designed to help educators understand and answer the following questions:

- Are your students graduating from high school prepared for college and career?
- Are enough of your students taking core courses necessary to be prepared for success, and are those courses rigorous enough?
- What are the most popular majors/occupations, and what does the pipeline for each look like?
- What other dimensions of college and career readiness, outside of academic readiness, should educators measure and track?

We sincerely hope this report will serve as a call to action—or even as a wake-up call—that our nation's current policies and practices are not having the desired effect of increasing the college and career readiness levels of US high school graduates. We remain committed to providing more and better data so individuals and institutions can make better-informed decisions leading to the improved educational outcomes we all desire and help more individuals achieve education and workplace success.

# Key Findings

## The Condition of College & Career Readiness 2015— Students from Low-Income Families

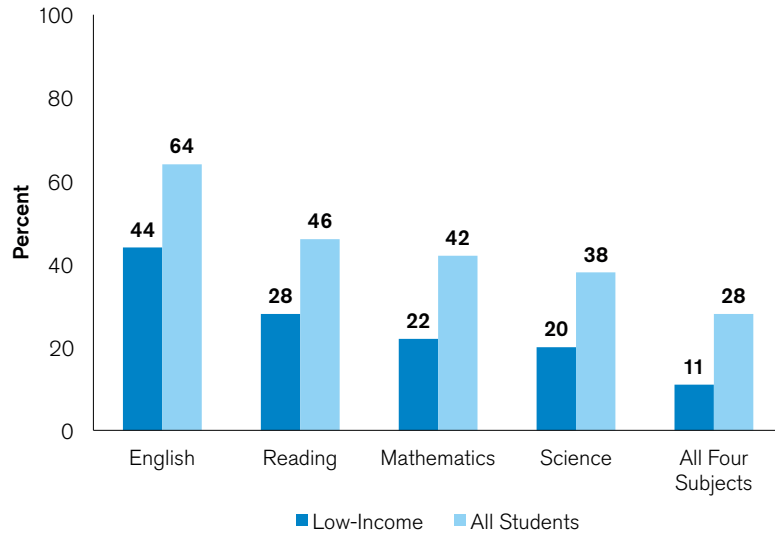
Key Findings	Implications	Recommendations
<p><b>Academic readiness and family income.</b> Overall, most students are not ready for the academic rigors of college, but low-income students are especially vulnerable (pp. 6–10). The performance gap between student groups based on income is substantial and persistent.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• While there is a wide gap between the college readiness of lower- and higher-income students in secondary school, research demonstrates that academic gaps emerge far earlier</li> <li>• Without the requisite academic foundation, most low-income students will have limited postsecondary education opportunities, struggle academically, and will complete college at lower rates than their higher-income peers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The roots of college success are planted early. Therefore, to improve college outcomes, it's essential that we expand college access and readiness programs no later than the middle grades to monitor, support, and accelerate the academic growth of low-income students</li> <li>• The secondary-to-postsecondary transition is particularly challenging for low-income students and requires systemic approaches about how to effectively advise, guide, and support students academically, socially, and financially</li> <li>• Colleges should embrace emerging research on how innovative approaches to developmental education can put students on the path to success more effectively with key supplemental supports</li> </ul>
<p><b>Postsecondary aspirations.</b> Regardless of income, most students aspire to some postsecondary education (p. 14).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Over time, the aspiration gap between lower- and higher-income peers has narrowed substantially</li> <li>• Despite high counselor-to-student ratios, schools, districts, and states are succeeding in fostering higher postsecondary expectations among students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sustain the national effort to foster college-going cultures in low-income schools</li> <li>• Marry a student's high aspirations to a concrete plan to set academic goals, take the right courses, and participate in academic interventions</li> <li>• Expand advising efforts to move the conversation from the need to enroll into "any college" to the "right college" that meets a student's unique academic, social, and financial needs</li> </ul>
<p><b>Core course taking and readiness.</b> Low-income students who take a core high school curriculum are more likely to be academically ready for college (p. 10).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taking the right high school courses is a decision that has profound consequences, yet we aren't seeing enough low-income students enrolling</li> <li>• While not every student will pursue a traditional four-year postsecondary degree, completing the core curriculum ensures that students have a range of viable options</li> <li>• While offering the right courses is essential, schools and districts must also ensure they are of sufficient quality and intensity to prepare students for college</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish practices, interventions, and policies to ensure that students and their families are sufficiently supported as they select and enroll in the right high school courses</li> <li>• An effort must be made at the state and local levels to ensure that not only are the right courses available, but that they are sufficiently rigorous and aligned to postsecondary expectations</li> <li>• School and system leaders should strongly consider making the core curriculum the default option for all students</li> </ul>
<p><b>Academic achievement, behaviors, and college retention.</b> Students, regardless of income, are more likely to persist in college if they have exhibited higher degrees of academic discipline, commitment to college, and social connections (p. 15).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There are core noncognitive skills that are strongly correlated with college success and should be developed and nurtured over time</li> <li>• A better understanding of the noncognitive skills can help better advise students through the college readiness process and guide students into academic interventions when necessary</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Incorporate noncognitive measures into broader assessment, advising, and college readiness programming to help tailor the quality, intensity, and regularity of student interventions</li> <li>• Help students understand and develop essential skills and behaviors through academic and mentoring programs that teach study skills, foster resilience, and reaffirm one's commitment to college</li> <li>• Colleges should incorporate noncognitive measures to complement first-year advising, placement, and developmental education programs</li> </ul>

# Students from Low-Income Families

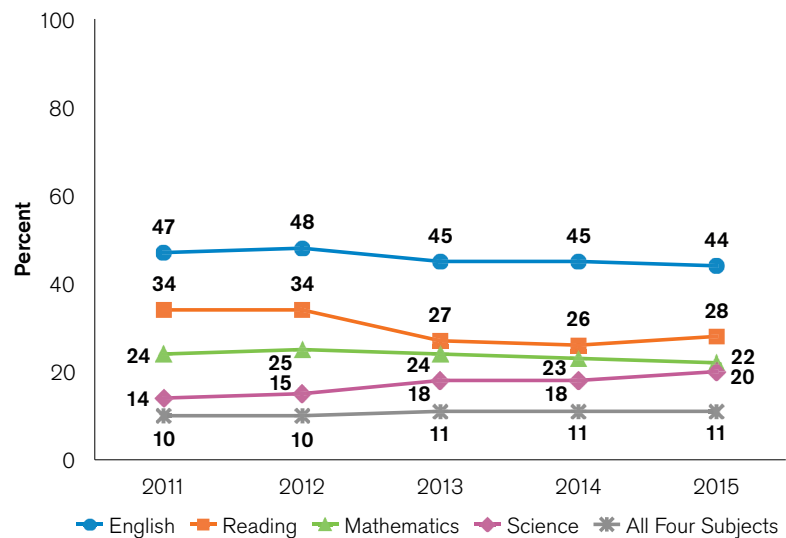
## Attainment of College and Career Readiness

- Low-income students are those who report that their family income is less than \$36,000 per year.<sup>2</sup>
- 440,389 low-income 2015 high school graduates took the ACT.

Percent of 2015 ACT-Tested Low-Income High School Graduates Meeting ACT College Readiness Benchmarks by Subject



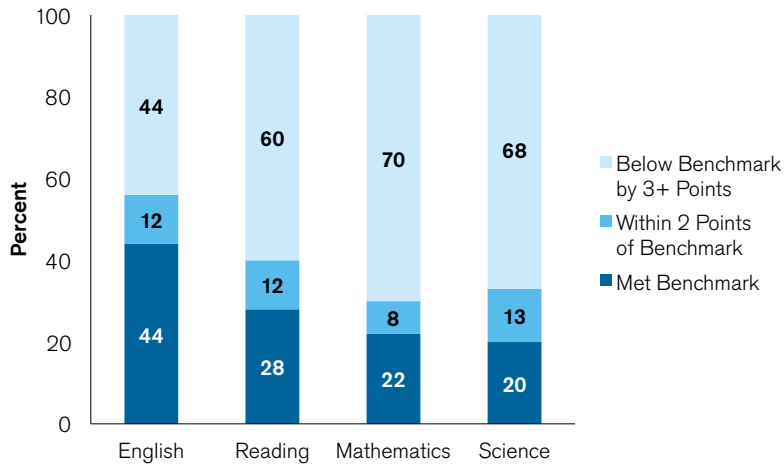
Percent of 2011–2015 ACT-Tested Low-Income High School Graduates Meeting ACT College Readiness Benchmarks



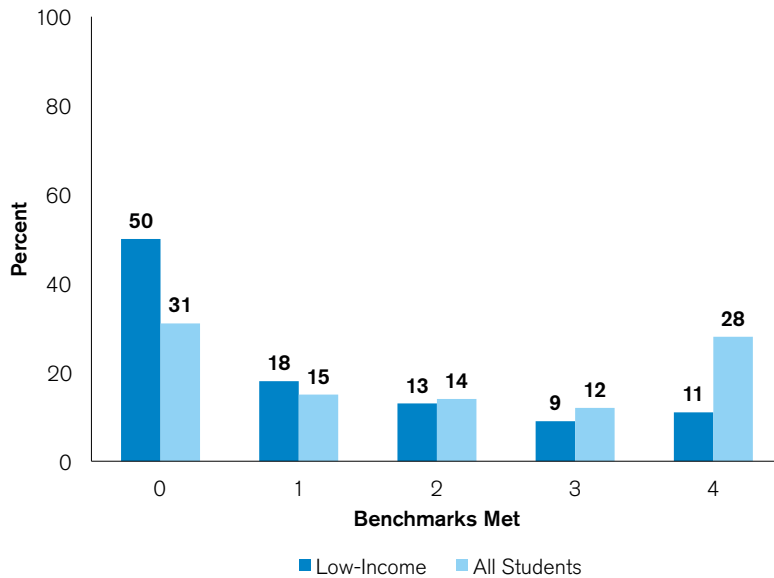
Note: Percents in this report may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

## Near Attainment of College and Career Readiness

Percent of 2015 ACT-Tested Low-Income High School Graduates by ACT College Readiness Benchmark Attainment and Subject



Percent of 2015 ACT-Tested Low-Income High School Graduates by Number of ACT College Readiness Benchmarks Attained

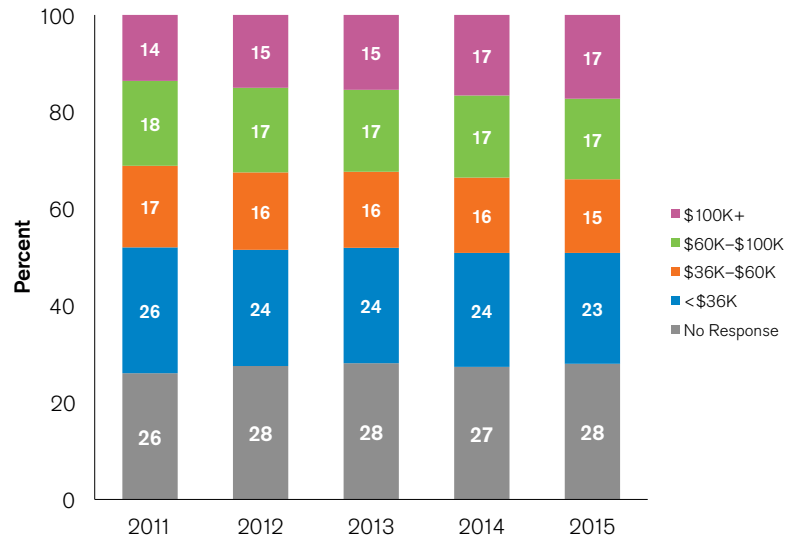


# Students from Low-Income Families

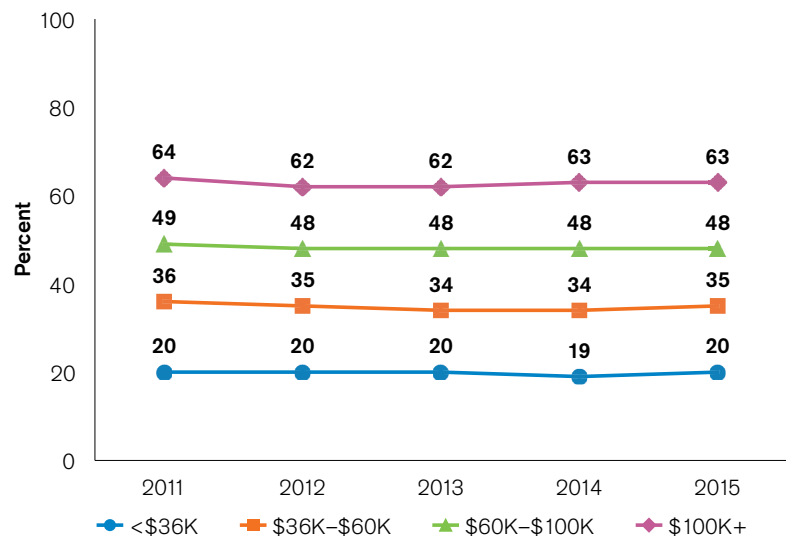
## Participation and Opportunity

Over the past decade, ACT has experienced unprecedented growth in the number of students tested, as well as statewide partnerships in 14 states and in many districts across the country. As a result, the 2015 *Condition of College & Career Readiness* report provides a much deeper and more representative sample in comparison to a purely self-selected college-going population.

**Percent of 2011–2015 ACT-Tested High School Graduates by Family Income**



**Percent of 2011–2015 ACT-Tested High School Graduates Meeting Three or More Benchmarks by Family Income**

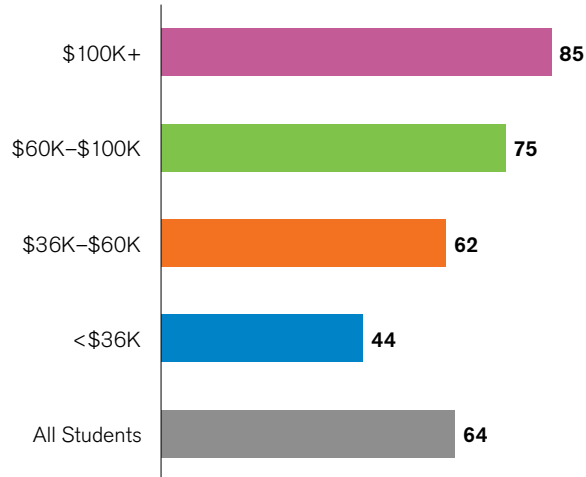




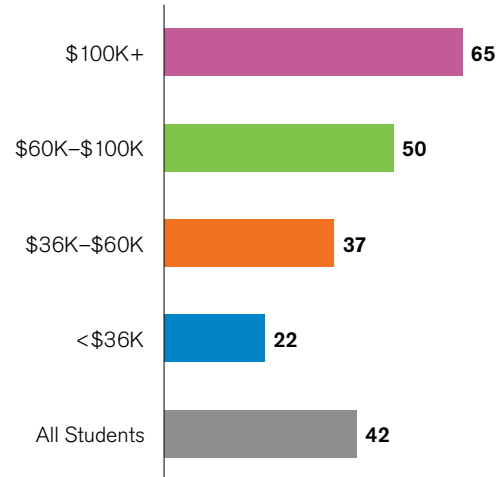
# Participation and Opportunity by Subject

Percent of 2015 ACT-Tested High School Graduates Meeting ACT College Readiness Benchmarks by Family Income and Subject

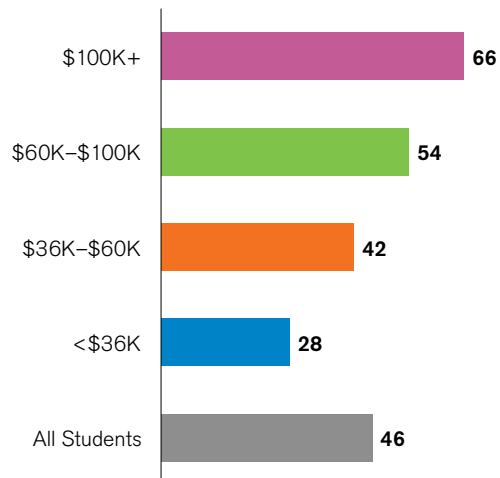
## English



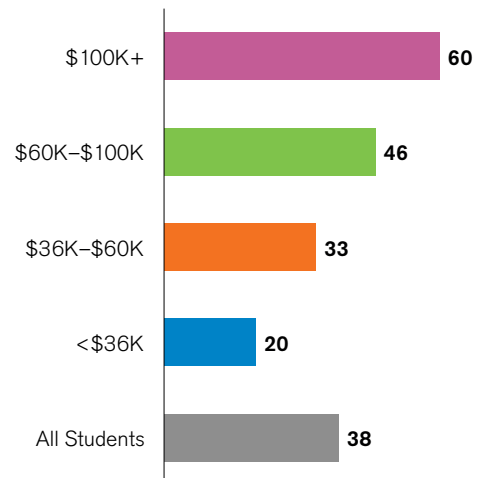
## Mathematics



## Reading



## Science

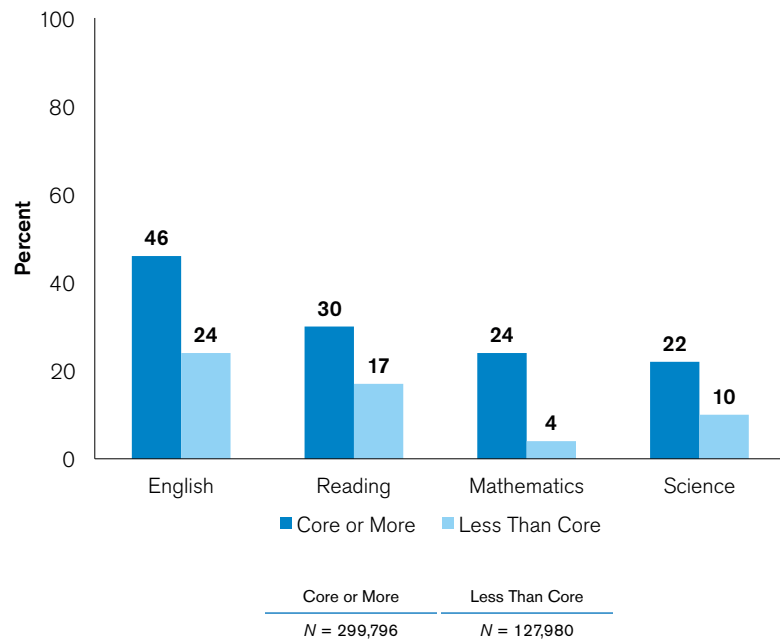


# Students from Low-Income Families

## Course-Taking Patterns and Benchmark Performance

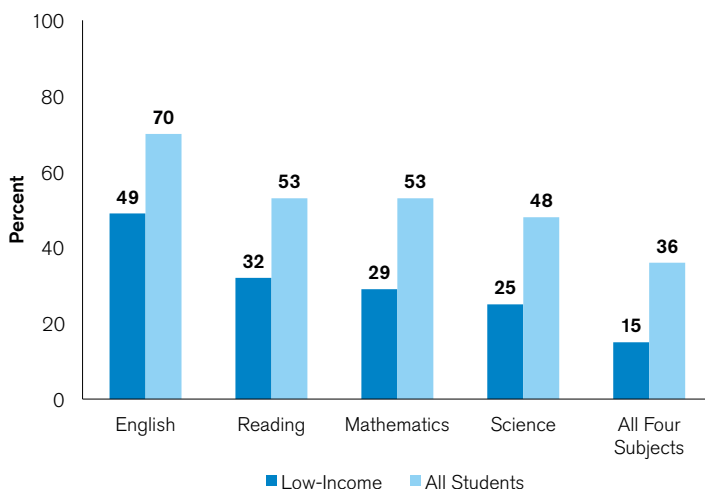
Within subjects, ACT has consistently found that students who take the recommended core curriculum are more likely to be ready for college or career than those who do not. A core curriculum is defined as four years of English and three years each of mathematics, social studies, and science.<sup>3</sup>

**Percent of 2015 ACT-Tested Low-Income High School Graduates in Core or More vs. Less Than Core Courses Meeting ACT College Readiness Benchmarks by Subject**



## A Look at STEM

**Percent of 2015 ACT-Tested Low-Income High School Graduates with an Interest in STEM Meeting ACT College Readiness Benchmarks by Subject (N = 162,247)**

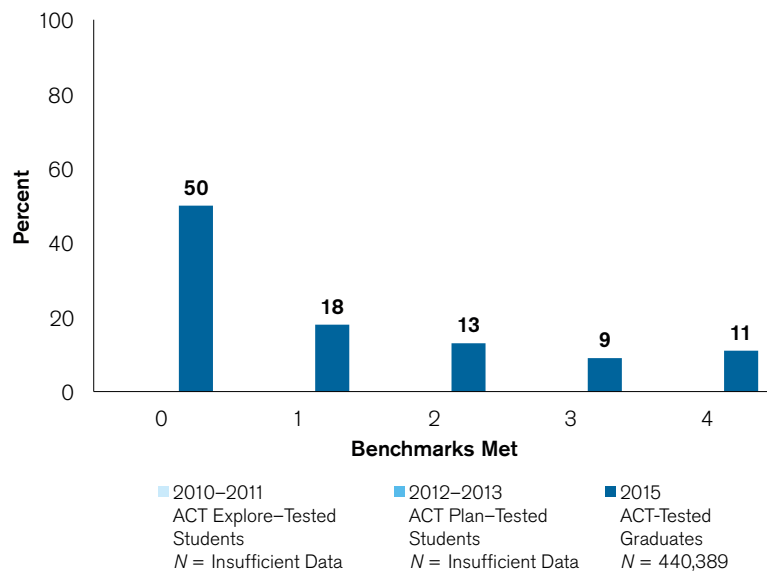


This chart compares ACT College Readiness Benchmark attainment for 2015 low-income high school graduates nationwide who have an interest in STEM majors or occupations to STEM-interested graduates nationally. Characteristics of students with an interest in STEM were addressed in greater depth in the *Condition of STEM 2014* report.

## Early Preparation

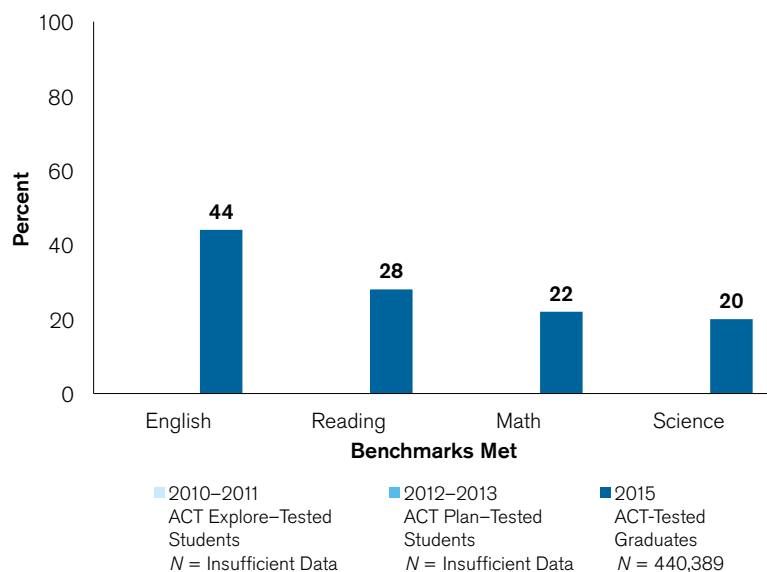
ACT research shows that younger students who take rigorous curricula are more prepared to graduate from high school ready for college or career. Moreover, our research (*The Forgotten Middle*, 2008) found that “the level of academic achievement that students attain by 8th grade has a larger impact on their college and career readiness by the time they graduate from high school than anything that happens academically in high school!”

**Percent of Students Meeting ACT College Readiness Benchmarks at Three Stages of Academic Development**



In past *Condition* reports, ACT Explore®, ACT Plan®, and ACT results all reflected data from students testing or graduating in the current year. This year, ACT Explore and ACT Plan results reflect 2015 graduating class examinees (both tested and not tested with the ACT) when they were assessed in 8th and 10th grades. The goal of this change is to describe the condition of college and career readiness for this year's graduates and their counterparts as they progressed from 8th grade to 10th grade and through graduation.

**Percent of Students Meeting ACT College Readiness Benchmarks by Content Area at Three Stages of Academic Development**



# Students from Low-Income Families

## ACT College Readiness Benchmark Attainment for Top Planned College Majors: 2015 Graduates

When students register for the ACT, they can select a college major—from a list of 294 majors—that they plan to pursue in college. Among recent ACT-tested high school graduates nationwide, about 80% selected a specific planned major, whereas about 20% indicated that they were undecided or did not select a major.

This table ranks the top (most frequently selected) majors among 2015 graduates from low-income families. The percentages of students meeting the ACT College Readiness Benchmarks are shown for each major. Across these planned majors, there are considerable differences in the percentage of students who are ready to succeed in college.

Major Name	N	English	Reading	Math	Science	All Four
<b>Undecided</b>	46,820	45	30	23	20	12
<b>Nursing, Registered (BS/RN)</b>	26,502	41	22	14	13	6
<b>No Major Indicated</b>	13,886	13	7	4	4	1
<b>Medicine (Pre-Medicine)</b>	13,707	67	47	42	37	25
<b>Business Administration and Management, General</b>	11,673	42	25	22	17	9
<b>Criminology</b>	9,039	39	24	15	14	7
<b>Mechanical Engineering</b>	7,387	41	27	34	26	17
<b>Law (Pre-Law)</b>	7,261	44	29	20	18	11
<b>Psychology, Clinical and Counseling</b>	6,729	60	39	23	23	12
<b>Medical Assisting</b>	6,610	27	16	10	9	4
<b>Biology, General</b>	6,373	64	44	38	34	22
<b>Accounting</b>	5,936	46	27	34	23	13
<b>Computer Science and Programming</b>	5,131	63	46	48	42	29
<b>Nursing, Practical/Vocational (LPN)</b>	4,972	28	13	8	8	3
<b>Physical Therapy (Pre-Physical Therapy)</b>	4,808	46	25	20	18	9
<b>Hospital/Facilities Administration</b>	4,727	29	16	11	8	4
<b>Athletic Training</b>	4,650	37	21	16	14	6
<b>Graphic Design</b>	4,469	45	28	18	17	9
<b>Psychology, General</b>	4,452	64	44	28	27	16
<b>Veterinary Medicine (Pre-Veterinarian)</b>	4,243	52	34	21	23	12
<b>Music, General</b>	4,099	43	25	18	17	9
<b>Engineering (Pre-Engineering), General</b>	4,095	52	35	42	35	23
<b>Pharmacy (Pre-Pharmacy)</b>	4,087	58	35	36	29	17
<b>Music, Performance</b>	3,705	44	26	18	15	9
<b>Elementary Education</b>	3,688	48	28	19	16	9
<b>Early Childhood Education</b>	3,415	35	20	11	9	4
<b>Biochemistry and Biophysics</b>	3,368	67	48	47	42	30
<b>Physical Therapy Assisting</b>	3,367	29	15	11	9	3
<b>Art, General</b>	3,294	41	24	14	14	7
<b>Health/Medical Technology, General</b>	3,209	46	26	20	18	10

Note: *Undecided* and/or *No Major Indicated* are included in the table, if applicable. The former refers to students who selected the option *Undecided* from the list of majors. The latter refers to students who did not respond to the question.

## ACT College Readiness Benchmark Attainment for the Top Planned College Majors with Good Fit: 2015 Graduates

Many students gravitate toward majors that align with their preferred activities and values. ACT research has shown that greater *interest-major fit* is related to important student outcomes such as persistence in a major or college. This table shows, for each planned major, the numbers and percentages of students from low-income families displaying good interest-major fit<sup>4</sup>, as well as the percentages of students meeting the ACT College Readiness Benchmarks. Since only students who completed the ACT Interest Inventory during ACT registration are included here, this table shows results for a subset of the students in the prior table. These planned majors vary considerably in the percentage of students displaying good interest-major fit and meeting the ACT College Readiness Benchmarks. The results highlight the importance of examining multiple predictors of college success and affirm the value of a holistic view of college readiness.

Major Name	N Fit	% Fit	English	Reading	Math	Science	All Four
<b>Undecided</b>			No profile available				
<b>Nursing, Registered (BS/RN)</b>	7,105	27	49	27	17	17	7
<b>No Major Indicated</b>			No profile available				
<b>Medicine (Pre-Medicine)</b>	6,198	45	73	53	47	43	29
<b>Business Administration and Management, General</b>	4,067	35	45	28	25	19	11
<b>Criminology</b>	1,154	13	48	32	16	16	8
<b>Mechanical Engineering</b>	2,431	33	44	30	38	30	19
<b>Law (Pre-Law)</b>	2,320	32	55	38	24	21	13
<b>Psychology, Clinical and Counseling</b>	1,039	15	70	51	26	28	15
<b>Medical Assisting</b>	1,556	24	31	18	12	10	5
<b>Biology, General</b>	3,095	49	69	49	42	39	25
<b>Accounting</b>	3,280	55	49	28	37	24	14
<b>Computer Science and Programming</b>	1,524	30	66	50	51	46	32
<b>Nursing, Practical/Vocational (LPN)</b>	1,042	21	37	17	10	12	4
<b>Physical Therapy (Pre-Physical Therapy)</b>	1,051	22	53	31	25	23	11
<b>Hospital/Facilities Administration</b>	940	20	29	17	10	9	4
<b>Athletic Training</b>	747	16	48	28	22	20	10
<b>Graphic Design</b>	1,959	44	51	33	17	18	10
<b>Psychology, General</b>	922	21	74	53	31	32	19
<b>Veterinary Medicine (Pre-Veterinarian)</b>	1,573	37	58	40	25	28	15
<b>Music, General</b>	1,752	43	53	33	20	20	11
<b>Engineering (Pre-Engineering), General</b>	1,332	33	55	38	44	38	25
<b>Pharmacy (Pre-Pharmacy)</b>	1,507	37	65	41	45	38	23
<b>Music, Performance</b>	1,581	43	52	31	18	17	10
<b>Elementary Education</b>	844	23	53	31	20	17	10
<b>Early Childhood Education</b>	716	21	40	24	10	10	4
<b>Biochemistry and Biophysics</b>	1,789	53	70	52	50	46	33
<b>Physical Therapy Assisting</b>	545	16	32	19	15	13	4
<b>Art, General</b>	1,267	38	53	34	16	19	10
<b>Health/Medical Technology, General</b>	994	31	51	31	26	23	13

Note: *Undecided* and/or *No Major Indicated* are included in the table, if applicable. The former refers to students who selected the option *Undecided* from the list of majors. The latter refers to students who did not respond to the question.

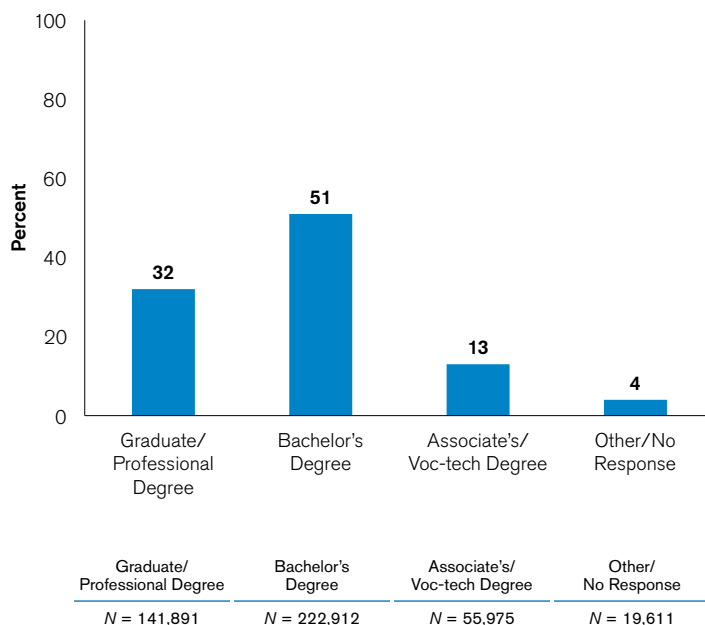
# Students from Low-Income Families

## Other College and Career Readiness Factors

### *Aligning Student Behaviors, Planning, and Aspirations*

Most students aspire to a post-high school credential. To help them meet those aspirations, educational planning, monitoring, and interventions must be aligned to their aspirations, begin early, and continue throughout their educational careers.

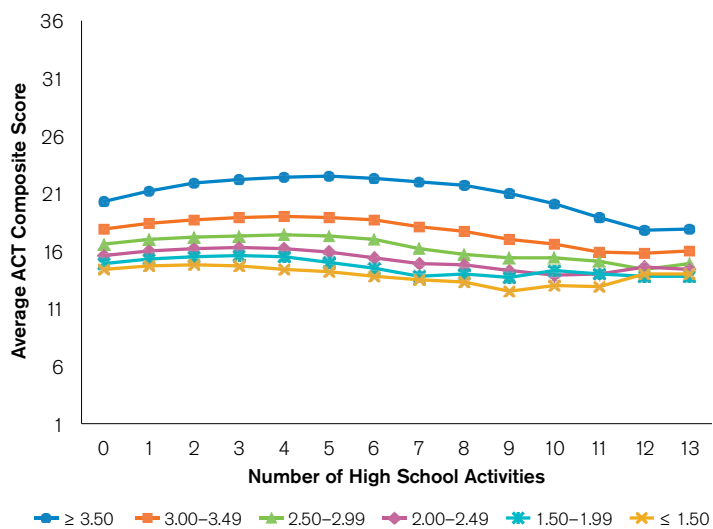
**Percent of 2015 ACT-Tested Low-Income High School Graduates by Educational Aspirations**



### *Activity and Achievement: What's the Connection?*

There are wide-ranging benefits to student participation in high school activities. Students can develop new skills, broaden their experiences, practice social skills, and increase their appeal to college admissions personnel. In addition, ACT data indicate that, regardless of a student's high school GPA, involvement in high school activities is often associated with higher ACT Composite scores. At the same time, results typically identify a point of diminishing returns, one where many activities are associated with a drop in ACT scores. The adjacent graph depicts the relationship between ACT scores and the number of high school activities for 2015 graduates.

**Average ACT Composite Score by Number of Activities within High School GPA Ranges for 2015 Graduates**

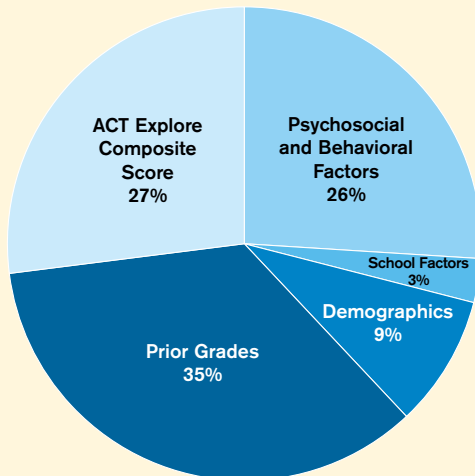


Note: In some cases, high activity counts may represent low numbers of students, giving rise to missing and outlying data points.

# Other College and Career Readiness Factors

## Early Prediction of High School Outcomes

**Relative Importance of Predictors of 12th-Grade Cumulative High School Grade Point Average**

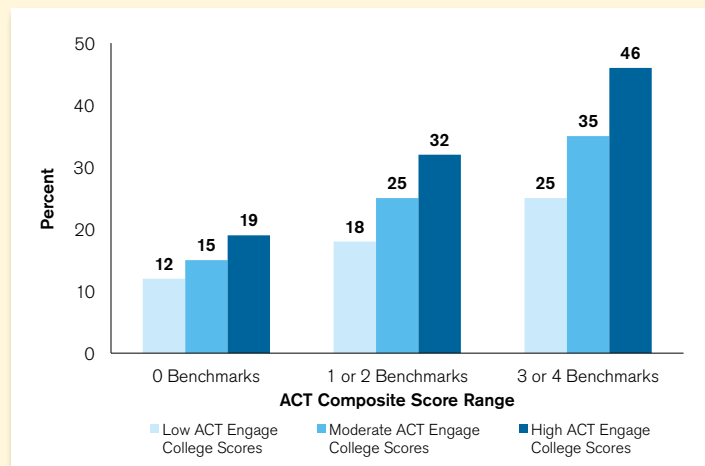


Note: The data used for this analysis came from a longitudinal sample of 3,768 students from 21 schools who took both ACT Explore and ACT Engage Grades 6–9 in 2006, when most students were in 8th grade. Additional waves of data were collected each fall, ending in 2011, when most students should have graduated from high school. The total variance explained in the model was  $R^2 = 0.51$ .

Understanding which student characteristics can predict future performance is essential to early identification and support for students at risk for later academic difficulties. A longitudinal research study found that, in 8th grade, the most important predictor of 12th grade GPA was student grades, followed by academic achievement (measured by ACT Explore) and psychosocial and behavioral factors (measured by ACT Engage® Grades 6–9). Demographics (gender, race/ethnicity, and parent education) and school factors (percent eligible for free/reduced lunch eligible and percent minority) were less important predictors. These findings underscore the value of using multiple measures, including academic achievement and behaviors, to provide a more holistic approach to assessment that can better assist students in developing the knowledge and skills needed for success.

## Academic Achievement, Behaviors, and College Completion

**Percentage Attaining a Postsecondary Degree by ACT and ACT Engage College Scores**



Academic behaviors also matter for college outcomes. Across all ACT College Readiness Benchmark levels, students with higher ACT Engage College scores (based on the mean percentile scores of ACT Engage scales Academic Discipline, Commitment to College, and Social Connection) attained a postsecondary degree within four years of college at higher rates than students with lower ACT Engage College scores. For students meeting three or four Benchmarks, those with high ACT Engage College scores attained a timely postsecondary degree at nearly twice the rate as those with low ACT Engage College scores.

Note: Based on a longitudinal sample of 9,446 ACT-tested students from 48 postsecondary institutions who took ACT Engage College during their first semester of college in 2003. Additional waves of data were collected each semester through 2008. Students with a mean percentile score of less than 25 were classified as low, those with scores between 25 and 75 were classified as moderate, and those with scores greater than 75 were classified as high.

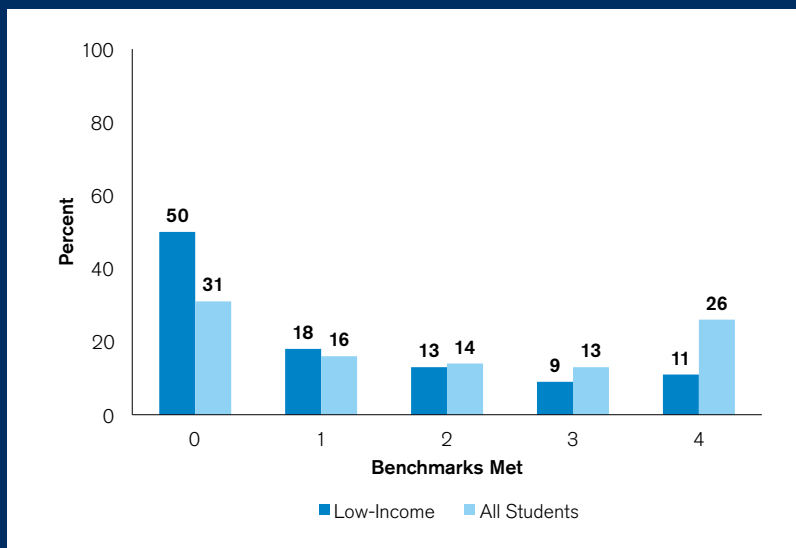
# Looking Back at the Class of 2014

## Students from Low-Income Families

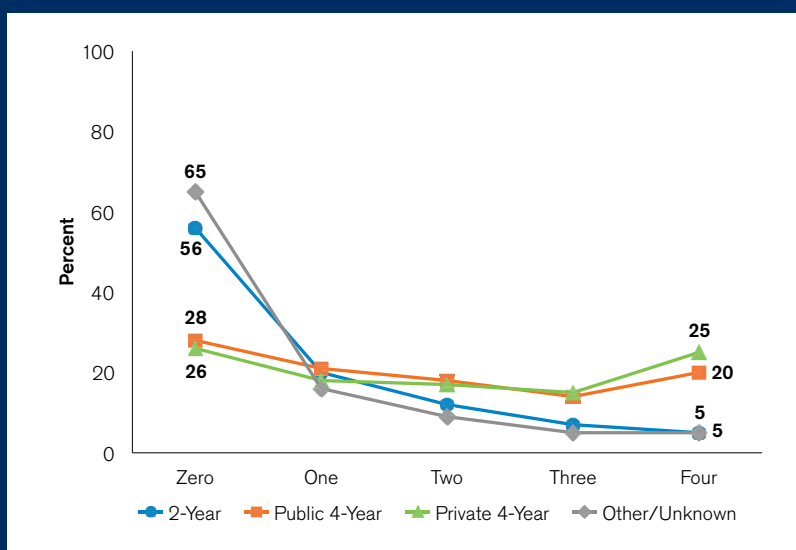
### *ACT College Readiness Benchmarks and Fall 2014 College Enrollment*

Academic achievement, as measured by ACT College Readiness Benchmark attainment, has a clear and distinctive relationship with the path taken by high school graduates. Those who were more academically ready were more likely to enroll in 4-year institutions. Graduates who enrolled in 2-year colleges or pursued other options after high school were more likely to have met fewer Benchmarks. For the sizable number of 2014 graduates who did not meet any Benchmarks, their post-high school opportunities appear to have been limited compared to their college-ready peers.

Percent of 2014 ACT-Tested Low-Income High School Graduates by Number of ACT College Readiness Benchmarks Attained



Percent of 2014 ACT-Tested Low-Income High School Graduates by Number of ACT College Readiness Benchmarks Attained and Fall 2014 College Enrollment Status





# Policies and Practices

## Call to Action

*The Condition of College & Career Readiness 2015* points to the ongoing need for educators and policymakers to support all students' readiness for college and career. Over the last several years, the average national ACT Composite score and ACT College Readiness Benchmark attainment of students taking the ACT® test has remained relatively constant. This is commendable given the increase in the number of students taking the ACT but little comfort to the students, teachers, and administrators working every day to increase student achievement.

To meet social and economic demands, it's a national priority to increase the number of students from low-income families who are prepared for and succeeding in postsecondary education. Given the substantial disparities in outcomes between lower- and higher-income students addressed in this report, closing this gap will require a tightly integrated approach to addressing postsecondary access, readiness, and success that spans the entire education continuum.

Drawing on the lessons learned from GEAR UP and other like-minded programs, ACT and the National Council for Community and Education Partnerships (NCCPEP) offer the following recommendations, which constitute a comprehensive yet attainable approach for improving the college and career readiness of low-income students:

**Adopt a Systemic Agenda to Improve Postsecondary Access, Readiness, and Success.** Increasing postsecondary completion requires that we address a multitude of academic and nonacademic challenges along the early-education-to-postsecondary-education continuum. Given the symbiotic and cumulative influence of effective practices along that continuum, any solution must begin with a much deeper and substantive collaboration among our education systems. As such, ACT and NCCPEP have long advocated for making college access, readiness, and success a national priority. Regions and states should foster stronger collaboration among K–12, postsecondary, and community leaders through better alignment of standards, curricula, instruction, assessments, and support programs. As has been demonstrated through the GEAR UP program, when K–12, postsecondary, and community-based organizations unify their efforts around shared goals and strategies, they can achieve impressive outcomes.

**Focus on Early Awareness and Intervention.**<sup>5</sup> As is well documented in research literature, college readiness begins early in a student's career. For low-income students in particular, more can be done to foster goals and expectations that lead to college and careers. Ensuring that students are on-track academically for college and career readiness well before the middle grades is absolutely critical. Leaders should expand early intervention and support programs to help accelerate the academic growth of those students. Whether through tutoring, mentoring, or summer programs, additional academic supports can help students make academic gains, but their needs must be addressed early and continuously. Given that students—regardless of income status—have high postsecondary aspirations, replicating or expanding college access and readiness programs in the elementary and middle grades can help bring relevance and rigor to these efforts.

**Support Low-Income Students and Families Through the College-Going Process.** While navigating the complexities of the college-going process is a struggle for many families, it presents especially unique challenges for low-income families. As our organizations have learned through GEAR UP and other college readiness programs, leaders should make a concerted effort to implement several interrelated strategies:

- Explore and set college and career goals. Helping students and their families explore their personal interests as it relates to college and career can bring relevance to their education and bring purpose to their educational planning. Whether through college visits, job-shadowing experiences, using online resources

like the interest and ability inventories included in ACT Profile ([www.act.org/profile](http://www.act.org/profile)), or other similar experiences, helping students imagine a future beyond high school is a critical first step that pays important dividends throughout their education and enables more purposeful educational planning in late middle and high school.

- **Focus on the development of key noncognitive skills.**<sup>6</sup> As illustrated in this report, there are underlying skills and behaviors that are highly correlated with academic success. For students, motivation, self-regulation, and study skills can be nurtured through mentoring, supplemental interventions, and pedagogy. Leaders should also focus on the quality of family engagement, which can impact the extent to which families have positive attitudes toward education, enjoy quality relationships with educators, and are actively involved in the college-going process. Taken together, these holistic efforts can strengthen the foundation for learning in K–12 and postsecondary contexts.
- **Help students make the right choices for academic success.** Students who complete the recommended core curriculum in high school are significantly more likely to be ready for college or career than those who do not. More needs to be done to help students and their families understand that meeting the basic requirements for high school graduation might fall short of the preparation needed to succeed in the first year of college. Helping students enroll and succeed in a rigorous core curriculum is a necessary step toward readiness and success. Yet despite this essential finding, too few low-income students are completing the recommended sequence. Leaders should engage students and their families to ensure that they are fully aware of what academic skills and knowledge are necessary to facilitate a wide range of options for life after high school. In addition, helping students and their families take full advantage of supplemental interventions and support programs can be aided through effective advising and engagement.
- **Guide students and families through the college enrollment and financial aid processes.** Although the postsecondary search, application, enrollment, and financing process is inherently complex, a little education can go a long way to demystifying that process. Providing large-group and personalized advising for low-income families to help them learn about financial readiness and aid, finding the right postsecondary fit, and supporting the college application process can help minimize the barriers to postsecondary education.

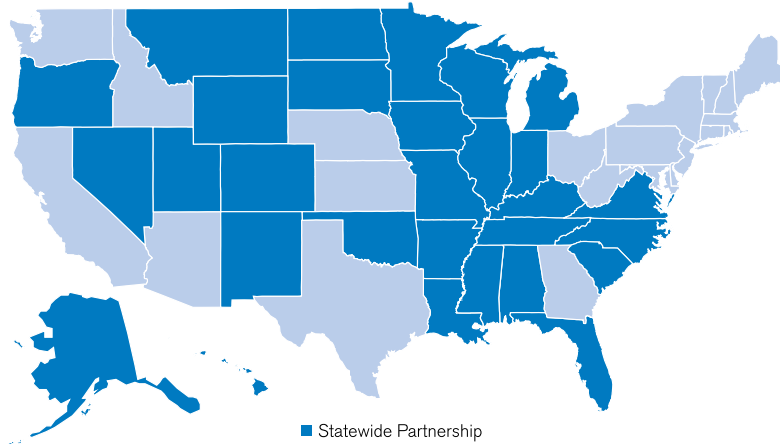
At the heart of these interrelated strategies is the strong need for high-quality advising, especially in schools where student-to-counselor ratios are intolerably high. While expanding investments in our school counseling infrastructure is critical, GEAR UP programs have had a great deal of success leveraging postsecondary-focused college coaches, near-peer mentors, and online advising to help augment and complement their core counseling services.

**Use Data to Personalize Engagement and Support.** Educators are awash in data that can improve how we identify, engage, and support students who would benefit from academic interventions. State leaders can encourage the use of early alert systems that identify and engage students who are at risk of not being college and career ready. Federal and state leaders can invest in professional development so that school leaders, instructors, and counselors can use assessment data to strengthen their educational practices and guide students into support programs based on their unique strengths and weaknesses. Lastly, school leaders should seek out postsecondary-to-school feedback reports to help K–12 stakeholders understand the extent to which their students are enrolling and succeeding in postsecondary education and apply those trend data to adjust their practices accordingly.

# Resources


## Statewide Partnerships in College and Career Readiness

States that incorporate ACT college and career readiness solutions as part of their statewide assessments provide greater access to higher education and increase the likelihood of student success in postsecondary education. Educators also have the ability to establish a longitudinal plan using ACT assessments, which provide high schools, districts, and states with unique student-level data that can be used for effective student intervention plans.



State administration of ACT programs and services:

- Increases opportunities for minority and middle- to low-income students.
- Promotes student educational and career planning.
- Reduces the need for remediation.
- Correlates with increases in college enrollment, persistence, and student success.
- Aligns with state standards.

<b>ACT<sup>®</sup> Aspire<sup>™</sup></b>	<b>ACT<sup>®</sup> Explore<sup>™</sup></b>	<b>ACT<sup>®</sup> Plan<sup>™</sup></b>	<b>The ACT<sup>®</sup></b>	<b>ACT<sup>®</sup> QualityCore<sup>™</sup></b>	<b>ACT<sup>®</sup> WorkKeys<sup>™</sup></b>		<b>ACT National Career Readiness Certificate<sup>™</sup></b>
<b>3rd- through 8th-grade students</b>	<b>8th- and 9th-grade students</b>	<b>10th-grade students</b>	<b>11th- and 12th-grade students</b>	<b>8th- through 12th-grade students</b>	<b>11th- and 12th-grade students</b>		
Alabama	Arkansas	Arkansas	Alabama	Alabama	Alabama	Alabama	Oklahoma
Arkansas	Louisiana	Florida	Alaska	Kentucky	Alaska	Alaska	Oregon
Hawaii	North Carolina	Louisiana	Arkansas		Hawaii	Arkansas	South Carolina
	Oklahoma	North Carolina	Colorado		Kentucky	Indiana	South Dakota
<b>8th- through 10th-grade students</b>	Tennessee	Oklahoma	Hawaii		Louisiana	Iowa	Tennessee
	Utah	Tennessee	Illinois		Michigan	Kentucky	Tennessee
Alabama		Utah	Kentucky		North Carolina	Louisiana	Utah
Arkansas			Louisiana		Carolina	Minnesota	Virginia
Hawaii			Minnesota		North Dakota	Missouri	Wisconsin
Wisconsin			Mississippi		Dakota	New Mexico	
Wyoming			Missouri		South Carolina	North Carolina	
			Montana		Wisconsin	Carolina	
			Nevada		Wyoming		
			North Carolina				
			North Dakota				
			Tennessee				
			Utah				
			Wisconsin				
			Wyoming				

All listed partnerships are effective as of July 2015.

# ACT Research

The continued increase of test takers enhances the breadth and depth of the data pool, providing a comprehensive picture of the current college readiness levels of the graduating class as well as offering a glimpse of the emerging national educational pipeline. It also allows us to review various aspects of the ACT-tested graduating class, including the following reports:

## Releasing in the 2015–2016 Academic Year

### *The Condition of STEM 2015*

- National report
- State reports
- Underserved learners

### *The Condition of College and Career Readiness 2015*

- National report
- State reports
- African American students
- American Indian students
- Asian students

- Hispanic students
- Pacific Islander students
- First-generation students
- Linguistically diverse students
- Students from low-income families

## Other ACT Research Reports

### **College Choice Report (for the graduating class of 2013)**

- *Part 1: Preferences and Prospects*—November 2013
- *Part 2: Enrollment Patterns*—July 2014
- *Part 3: Persistence and Transfer*—April 2015

### **College Choice Report (for the graduating class of 2014)**

- *Part 1: Expanding Opportunities: Preferences and Prospects*—November 2014
- *Part 2: Expanding Opportunities: Enrollment Patterns*—July 2015

To be notified of exact release dates, please subscribe here:

[www.act.org/research/subscribe.html](http://www.act.org/research/subscribe.html).

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## How Does ACT Determine if Students Are College Ready?

The ACT College Readiness Benchmarks are scores on the ACT subject area tests that represent the level of achievement required for students to have a 50% chance of obtaining a B or higher or about a 75% chance of obtaining a C or higher in corresponding credit-bearing first-year college courses. Based on a nationally stratified sample, the Benchmarks are median course placement values for these institutions and represent a typical set of expectations. ACT College Readiness Benchmarks were revised for 2013 graduating class reporting. The ACT College Readiness Benchmarks are:

College Course	Subject Area Test	Original ACT College Readiness Benchmark	Revised ACT College Readiness Benchmark
English Composition	English	18	18
Social Sciences	Reading	21	22
College Algebra	Mathematics	22	22
Biology	Science	24	23

## Notes

1. With the exception of the top graph on page 7, data related to students who did not provide information or who responded “Other” to questions about gender, family income, high school curriculum, etc., are not presented explicitly.
2. The definition of “low-income” does not take family size into account.
3. Data reflect subject-specific curriculum. For example, English “Core or More” results pertain to students who took at least four years of English, regardless of courses taken in other subject areas.
4. The interest-major fit score measures the strength of the relationship between the student's profile of ACT Interest Inventory scores and the profile of students' interests in the major shown. Interest profiles for majors are based on a national sample of undergraduate students with a declared major and a GPA of at least 2.0. Major was determined in the third year for students in 4-year colleges and in the second year for students in 2-year colleges. Interest-major fit scores range from 0–99, with values of 80 and higher indicating good fit.
5. Chrys Dougherty, *College and Career Readiness: The Importance of Early Learning Success* (Iowa City, IA: ACT, February 2013), <http://www.act.org/research/policymakers/pdf/ImportanceofEarlyLearning.pdf>.
6. ACT, *Enhancing College and Career Readiness and Success: The Role of Academic Behaviors* (Iowa City, IA: ACT), [http://www.act.org/engage/pdf/ENGAGE\\_Issue\\_Brief.pdf](http://www.act.org/engage/pdf/ENGAGE_Issue_Brief.pdf).







ACT is an independent, nonprofit organization that provides assessment, research, information, and program management services in the broad areas of education and workforce development. Each year, we serve millions of people in high schools, colleges, professional associations, businesses, and government agencies, nationally and internationally. Though designed to meet a wide array of needs, all ACT programs and services have one guiding purpose—helping people achieve education and workplace success.

For more information, visit [www.act.org](http://www.act.org).



A quality education is one of the single most important factors in determining an individual's success in life. Yet, millions of young people from low-income communities find the door to higher education all but shut to them. The National Council for Community and Education Partnerships (NCCEP) is dedicated to the fundamental principle that every child deserves an equal chance to obtain a high-quality college education. NCCEP is a national nonprofit, nonpartisan organization working to increase access to higher education for economically disadvantaged students.

For more information, visit [www.edpartnerships.org](http://www.edpartnerships.org).



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**Community and Education**  
Partnerships

A copy of this report can be found at  
[www.act.org/readiness/2015](http://www.act.org/readiness/2015)