

POLICY
PLATFORM

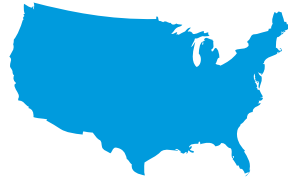
POST
SECONDARY
EDUCATION



ACT's Policy Platform

POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION





The United States has a
diverse and vibrant system
of higher education with a
long-standing commitment
to expanding access
and opportunity
to all students.



Buoyed by strong public and private support,¹ the higher education enterprise has grown by nearly 30 percent over the last ten years—from 17 million students in 2004 to a projected 22 million students in 2014.² Over the last several years, however, federal policymakers and institutional leaders have raised concerns about lagging rates of degree completion relative to the gains in college enrollment.

For example, just 64 percent of first-time, degree-seeking students at public four-year colleges completed their degrees within six years. More worryingly, only two out of five first-time, degree-seeking community college students earned a postsecondary credential within six years.³ Both rates have barely budged in the last decade.⁴ In other words, simply encouraging more students to attend postsecondary institutions, and increasing funds to do so, are insufficient as standalone policy interventions. It is just as critical, if not more so, to improve students' completion rates. Among underserved groups of students, the need to improve completion rates is even more immediate.

Recent labor market projections lend a strong sense of urgency to efforts to increase the degree attainment rates at our nation's public two- and four-year institutions. By 2018, nearly two-thirds of jobs in our country will require at least some college education.⁵ The United States has a diverse and vibrant system of higher education with a long-standing commitment to expanding access and opportunity to all students. Thus, it is imperative that policy and research join forces to develop and expand innovative policies and effective practices that will increase the number of Americans earning college degrees. The forthcoming reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA) and other related statutes affords an opportunity to ensure that more students are ready for and graduate with a high-quality postsecondary education.

Driven by its mission of helping people succeed in education and the workplace, and leveraging more than 50 years of empirical evidence related to postsecondary readiness and academic achievement, ACT has identified specific opportunities to improve existing policies and craft new ones that can help more people access, succeed in, and benefit from postsecondary education.

While the issues discussed in this platform do not cover the entire spectrum of challenges faced by higher education, they represent areas where ACT's research on and experience with vital education and workforce development issues provide relevant and compelling evidence to inform policy decisions.

READINESS in numbers



Only **2 out of 5** first-time, degree-seeking community college students earned a postsecondary credential **within 6 years.**



By 2018, nearly **two-thirds of jobs** in our country will require at least some college education.

ACT’s postsecondary education policy platform focuses on **three main issues:**

**Support
Postsecondary
Readiness**

Improve the educational attainment levels of all students by supporting policies at both the K-12 and postsecondary levels that are designed to increase academic readiness and initial postsecondary success.

**Advance Efforts That
Reduce Information
Barriers**

Seek innovative ways to improve the quality and availability of information—and support for using it—to students navigating their postsecondary educational options.

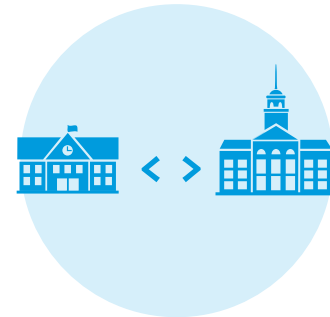
**Adopt Holistic
Approaches to
Increasing
Postsecondary
Completion**

Support the linking and scaling-up of interventions and policies that are effective at improving students’ advancement across the K-career continuum.

In the following pages, each issue is explained and then followed by a set of related policy recommendations. While these recommendations are directed toward federal policymakers, greater coordination and collaboration with state legislatures, institution heads, and leaders in the business and philanthropic communities are necessary to implement these recommendations in ways that achieve sustainable and systematic results.

1 SUPPORT POSTSECONDARY READINESS

Improve the educational attainment levels of all students by supporting policies at both the K-12 and postsecondary levels that are designed to increase academic readiness and initial postsecondary success.



Increasing college persistence and degree completion rates is a shared responsibility across the K-12 and postsecondary education systems. Factors at both levels influence a student’s likelihood of postsecondary success, whether in two- or four-year colleges, career and technical centers, or targeted workforce training programs.

A student’s success in college-level courses is heavily influenced by the academic rigor of his or her high school curriculum, and college instructors have repeatedly raised concerns about the level of academic readiness of high school graduates. **ACT’s latest National Curriculum Survey demonstrates a stark and persistent gap between high school teachers’ generally positive perceptions of their students’ readiness for college-level work and college instructors’ generally negative perceptions of the readiness of their entering students.**⁶ Specifically, the vast majority of high school teachers surveyed reported that, after leaving their course, their students were “well” or “very well” prepared for college-level work in the content area covered by that course. In contrast, only about one-fourth of the college instructors surveyed reported that their incoming students were “well” or “very well” prepared for credit-bearing first-year courses in their content area.⁷

ACT offers the following recommendations as examples of what K-12 and postsecondary education systems can do independently and collectively to improve students’ academic success in the first year of college and beyond.

1st RECOMMENDATION

SUPPORT RIGOROUS STANDARDS AND HIGH-QUALITY ASSESSMENTS: *Continue to support the implementation of college and career readiness benchmarks and corresponding high-quality assessments in K–12 education to better equip students for postsecondary success.*

As states continue to work toward defining and implementing more rigorous college and career readiness standards, such as the Common Core State Standards, the urgent need for such standards is clear. Far too many students arrive at college academically unprepared to do college-level work. According to a recent study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, one in five first-time postsecondary students started in a developmental course.⁸ Such courses are important in order to help students gain the necessary skills and knowledge required to tackle standard first-year college courses, but they typically do not count toward a degree, which means attainment is delayed or may be discouraged altogether.⁹

Until states require higher academic standards in the K–12 system, we will continue to see more students falling behind academically in earlier grades¹⁰ and lower percentages of students meeting ACT’s College Readiness Benchmarks, which indicate likely success in credit-bearing, first-year postsecondary courses in English, mathematics, science, and the social sciences.¹¹

Demonstrating mastery of college and career readiness standards through high-quality assessments is a critical step towards equipping students for postsecondary education and training, and eventually for workplace success and lifelong learning.

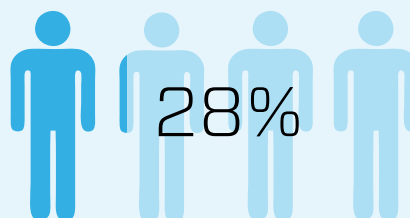
2nd RECOMMENDATION

IMPROVE DEVELOPMENTAL COURSES AND PLACEMENT: *Help postsecondary institutions devise or restructure existing courses and placement policies in ways that better support students in achieving their academic goals.*

Developmental courses are intended to prepare students to succeed in college-level work and persist to a degree, but the current system struggles to fulfill this goal. Consider the following:

- **High placement, few successes:** More than half of community college students are underprepared for college-level work: very few complete even their required sequence of developmental coursework, let alone graduate from college with a diploma or certificate.¹² ACT research has found that, on average, students in developmental college courses are not as successful in college as students who do not take such courses, with respect to GPA and persistence over time and degree completion within a fixed period. In other words, on average, **developmental courses do not prepare students for credit-bearing courses** at a level that would put them on par with students who immediately enroll in credit-bearing courses.
- **Low graduation rates:** An analysis of data from the U.S. Department of Education’s National Educational Longitudinal Study shows that only **28 percent of students in two-year colleges who take developmental courses attain a degree or certificate within eight and a half years of enrolling**, compared with 43 percent of two-year students who do not take developmental courses.

Recognizing the importance of the issue as well as the imminent need for systemic reforms, several higher education associations, higher education research centers, prominent foundations, and advocacy organizations have committed to doubling the number of students who complete developmental education programs and progress to the successful completion of related credit-bearing first year college courses by 2020.¹³ ACT supports this goal and urges the establishment of innovative strategies to help reach it.



Only **28%** of students in two-year colleges who take developmental courses attain a degree or certificate within eight and a half years of enrolling.

3rd RECOMMENDATION

LOOK BEYOND GRADES: *Support programs and policies that evaluate and assist the development of student behaviors that aid academic and workplace success.*

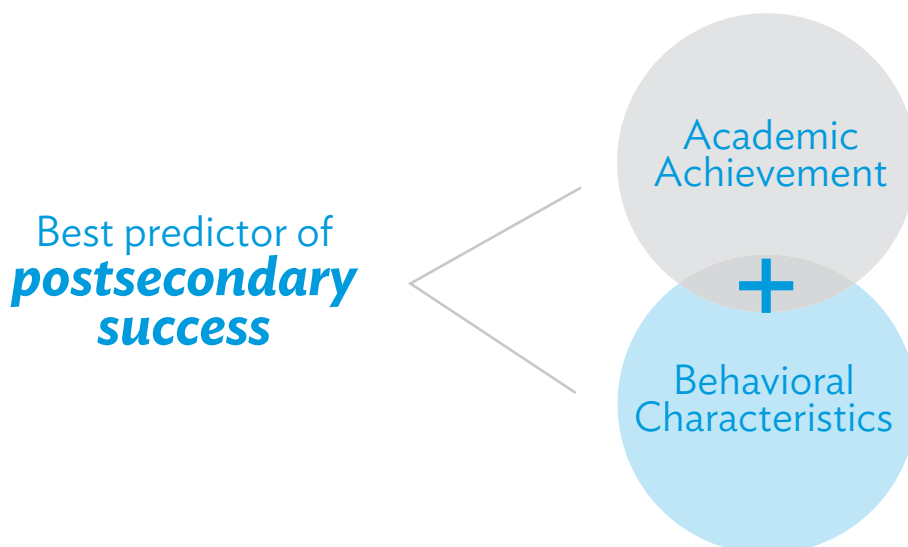
Students often fall short of their potential in college not because they lack the requisite academic skills, but because they have not sufficiently developed the necessary behaviors and habits that would help them successfully navigate college coursework. For example, the traits of perseverance and commitment are critically important to attaining a postsecondary credential in a program that spans multiple semesters and several years.¹⁴ **ACT research confirms that specific measures of motivational, self-management, and social engagement factors are all related to academic performance, such as first-year GPA, and retention in college.**¹⁵

Measuring these behaviors and other academically related factors is possible, and doing so can assess risk at important points in students' academic trajectories and identify areas of need and support.¹⁶ Among these behaviors are:¹⁷

- **Motivation:** Personal characteristics that help students succeed academically by focusing and maintaining energies on goal-directed activities. Middle school students with higher motivation scores earned higher grades and had higher persistence rates in high school.¹⁸

- **Social engagement:** Interpersonal factors that influence students' successful integration into their environment. Middle school students who scored high in social engagement were more likely to participate in extracurricular activities. Students who participated in more extracurricular activities had higher postsecondary retention rates.¹⁹
- **Self-regulation:** The thinking processes and emotional responses of students that govern how well they monitor, regulate, and control their behavior related to school and learning. Student self-regulation—as expressed, for example, in numbers of disciplinary events and suspensions—is an important indicator of student conduct in school.²⁰

Other behaviors that contribute to general work attitudes and conduct, such as diligence on the job, persistence to task completion, cooperation, teamwork, and rule compliance are frequently noted as critical behaviors expected by employers²¹ and are important in overall job effectiveness.²² **Federal policymakers should support efforts to cultivate those behaviors—also known as non-cognitive skills—that contribute to postsecondary achievement and have a noticeable impact on students' achievement and persistence levels.**



2 ADVANCE EFFORTS THAT REDUCE INFORMATION BARRIERS



Seek innovative ways to improve the quality and availability of information—and support for using it—to students navigating their postsecondary educational options.

Determining whether and where to go to college involves making a series of consequential decisions. Given the costs—both financial and in terms of the time and effort involved—**it is critical that students and their parents have access to credible information that is easy to find, not overwhelming, and tailored to their unique circumstances.**

1st RECOMMENDATION

IMPROVE EXISTING INFORMATIONAL RESOURCES: *Promote easy-to-understand and complete information about financial aid and postsecondary institutions to help students make informed decisions about their postsecondary options.*

Nationwide, just 57 percent of high school graduates completed a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) in academic year 2004-05.²³ Removing roadblocks to completing the FAFSA is critical because, in most cases, the results of the FAFSA are the only information students receive about their financial aid eligibility. When informed about the amount of financial aid available to them, many students who had assumed that they could not afford college ended up applying to and enrolling in college.²⁴ Further, college enrollment rates for low- and medium-income high school students increased when their families received detailed information about eligibility for financial aid.²⁵ Recent efforts to improve the FAFSA—including shorter and simpler forms and the ability to transfer information from tax returns directly to the form—are underway, but still need to be standardized and implemented nationally.

Additionally, both the new College Scorecard and the existing Net Price Calculator provide useful information about the cost to attend particular postsecondary institutions, but

these online resources can also be improved. For example, the College Scorecard—intended to help students learn more about a college's affordability and value in order to inform their college choices—includes information about an institution's graduation rate, but that rate includes only first-time, full-time students, which excludes 61 percent of students at four-year schools and 67 percent of students at two-year institutions.²⁶

Similarly, the information provided by the Net Price Calculator (mandated by the Higher Education Opportunity Act for all postsecondary institutions receiving Title IV federal student aid funding) is often presented in a way that complicates students' ability to make direct comparisons among institutions. For example, institutions are free to customize the calculator or build their own; to place it on their Web sites wherever they choose, even in difficult-to-find locations; and to request users to enter additional various kinds and amounts of information beyond a certain required minimum. The result is output that—when it is accessible at all—is inconsistent in its clarity, precision, and meaning across institutions.

Improving the FAFSA, the College Scorecard, and the Net Price Calculator will provide students with a more complete and accurate picture regarding essential information about postsecondary options.

It is critical that students and their parents have access to **credible information** that is easy to find, not overwhelming, and tailored to their unique circumstances.

WHERE SHOULD I GO?



Admissions Standards
Course Requirements
Academic Quality
Available Majors
Location
Class Size
Application Deadlines

CAN I AFFORD IT?



Family Income
Debt Scholarships
Tuition Increases Loans
Grants Actual Cost
Available State Funding
Federal Financial Aid

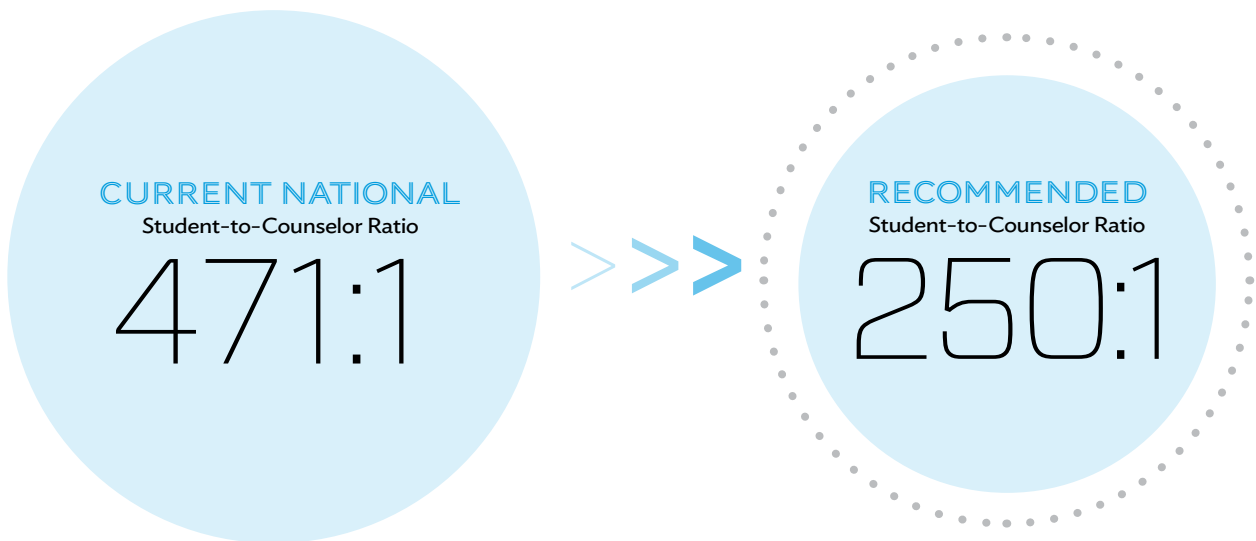
2nd RECOMMENDATION

ENHANCE PERSONAL COLLEGE COUNSELING RESOURCES: *Support targeted counseling to help students better understand their postsecondary options in both two- and four-year institutions.*

Ensuring that students have access to complete and accurate information is an important first step; ensuring that students receive constructive, one-on-one counseling, especially in certain high-poverty or geographically isolated high schools, is also critical.²⁷ The amount of data available to high school students has increased without subsequent guidance on how to use it. Recent research suggests that the lack of in-depth counseling about the full range of postsecondary options, including transfer, contributes to poor matches between students' academic capabilities and a suitably enriching postsecondary experience.²⁸ In fact, the current national student-to-counselor ratio is 471:1, nearly twice the recommended ratio of 250:1.²⁹ The lack of capacity contributes to a feeling among students that they are not getting enough help to choose the appropriate postsecondary educational path. For example:

- ACT's recent *College Choice Report* found a strong desire among students for more individual guidance and online tools to help them choose a college and major.³⁰
- Students whose career interests are consistent with their choice of postsecondary academic program are more likely to re-enroll for a second year of college.³¹ But only about one-third of ACT-tested 2013 high school graduates selected a college major that fits well with their expressed career interests.³²
- Three out of five students indicated that they would appreciate assistance in planning their next educational steps. Data from ACT Profile, an online college and career planning community, show that **62 percent of students indicated they need assistance with their educational/career plans.** Even among students who were very sure of their planned college major, nearly half indicated that they could have used some additional help.³³
- Research has also shown that counselors **have a significant impact on fostering positive behaviors to enhance students' postsecondary readiness.**³⁴

Student-to-Counselor Ratio



3 **ADOPT HOLISTIC APPROACHES TO INCREASING POSTSECONDARY COMPLETION**



Support the linking and scaling-up of interventions and policies that are effective at improving students' advancement across the K-career continuum.

Since the early 1980s, ACT's *What Works in Student Retention?*² series has highlighted several institutional strategies employed by colleges and universities that have been observed to improve student retention to the second year of college. Over the years, the series has endorsed the expansion of tutoring programs, mandatory course placement, early warning systems, and enhanced first-year student orientation, to name a few.³⁵ The underlying conclusion of this research, however, is that postsecondary institutions succeed in improving student retention not by focusing on a single “silver bullet,” but by implementing more holistic solutions that combine a range of supports to increase students' rates of success.

Research-based insights and effective data exchange across sectors can further guide and inform policymakers and practitioners, enabling them to make decisions that better support individuals along the K-career continuum. Such interaction can be particularly beneficial when it comes to improving student transitions, persistence and degree completion, and institutional practices.

1st RECOMMENDATION

PROMOTE RESEARCH AND LINK EFFECTIVE INTERVENTIONS: *Expand existing funding mechanisms—such as a repurposed Fund for Improvement in Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) grant program—to support efforts to scale up interventions proven to increase postsecondary persistence and completion.*

The Institute of Education Sciences (IES), as part of the Department of Education, funds new and innovative education research from conceptual planning to the scaling-up of rigorously evaluated practices and policies.

Expanding research and identifying effective interventions in postsecondary education, and then linking promising findings to other projects and findings across the educational continuum, can lead to better programs for students.

For example, lessons learned from successful high school dropout prevention programs could be used in combination with research findings from college orientation programs in ways that may lead to better retention of first-year college students. Likewise, a summer bridge program for low-income students could be supplemented with an innovative method, identified via an IES-funded project, for delivering need-based financial aid.

2nd RECOMMENDATION

ENGAGE EXPERTS ACROSS FEDERAL AGENCIES: *Establish a review panel of experts familiar with K–12, postsecondary, and workforce-related research projects across the various federal departments and agencies to make recommendations for linking large-scale initiatives in innovative and effective ways.*

The federal government's commitment to supporting research and applying relevant findings is clear. The rigorous and well-respected work of the IES helps identify programs and policies, but it is only one piece of the entire federal education research enterprise.⁹⁶ Other departments and agencies outside of the Department of Education, such as the Department of Health and Human Services, the National Science Foundation, and the Census Bureau, are engaged in research and development activities but often do so in isolation, which can lead to missed opportunities for focus and funding.

Greater interagency coordination is needed to reduce this fragmentation and the potential inefficiencies it creates. As one example, chairs from different research grant programs could serve on an interagency research grant program panel to identify already-funded projects that can be linked in order to more holistically and systematically improve student achievement and progress from the early grades through college and into the labor market. As another, two or more teams working on related research projects could share data or collaborate to examine longer-term effects.

Expanding research and identifying effective interventions in postsecondary education, and then **linking promising findings to other projects and findings** across the educational continuum, can lead to better programs for students.



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The recommendations offered
in this platform will help
establish a framework
that improves students' experience
navigating the postsecondary portion
of the continuum.

ACT's mission is to help people achieve education and workplace success.

At a time when the nation's economy is quickly changing and education beyond high school is more necessary than ever before, this Postsecondary Education Policy Platform extends that mission into the public policy arena, bringing ACT's unique experience and research in education and workforce assessment to bear on the challenge of ensuring that all students are able to progress successfully along the continuum from kindergarten through career. The recommendations offered in this platform—to support postsecondary readiness, reduce information barriers for students about their educational options, and foster innovation that increases postsecondary completion—will help establish a framework that improves students' experience navigating the postsecondary portion of the continuum.

To be effective, such efforts at the postsecondary level must be coordinated with improvements to our K-12 and workforce systems. This is why ACT has prepared three Policy Platforms – K-12 Education, Postsecondary Education, and Workforce Development – with related recommendations.

ALL OF ACT'S POLICY PLATFORMS ARE AVAILABLE ONLINE:

www.act.org/policyplatforms

Notes

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