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Challenges in Readiness Persist Among US High School Grads

ACT Points to Improvement Efforts and Calls for More Action, Especially for Underserved Students

IOWA CITY, Iowa—College and career readiness problems persist among U.S. high school graduates, with the majority ill-prepared for success at the next level, according to the latest edition of nonprofit ACT's yearly report, *The Condition of College & Career Readiness 2013*. ACT, however, points to solutions and ongoing efforts that could help improve student readiness in the future.

Only 39 percent of ACT-tested 2013 graduates met three or more of the four ACT College Readiness Benchmarks. Conversely, 31 percent of graduates did not meet any of the benchmarks. ACT research suggests that students who don't meet the benchmarks are likely to struggle in relevant first-year courses at two- and four-year colleges, which increases their risk of not succeeding in college.

"Once again, our data show that high school success and college readiness are not necessarily the same thing," said Jon Whitmore, ACT chief executive officer. "Too many students are likely to struggle after they graduate from high school. As a nation, we must set ambitious goals and take strong action to address this consistent problem. The competitiveness of our young people and of our nation as a whole in the global economy is at stake."

The research-based ACT College Readiness Benchmarks specify the minimum score students must earn on each of the four subject tests that make up the ACT® college readiness assessment (English, math, reading, and science) to have about a 75 percent chance of earning a grade of C or higher in a typical credit-bearing first-year college course in that subject area. ACT research suggests that students who meet the benchmarks are more likely than those who do not to persist in college and earn a degree.

The results continue to indicate that minority students are less likely than others to be ready for college. No more than 48 percent of African American, Hispanic and American Indian students met any of the four ACT College Readiness Benchmarks.

“We are particularly concerned about underserved students, who are much more likely than others to be at risk,” said Whitmore. “We must work hard to eliminate the gaps that exist.”

Whitmore, however, expressed optimism about the future.

“We are encouraged to see efforts already underway to address readiness issues,” said Whitmore. “Individual states are making bold efforts to improve college and career readiness, including strengthening learning standards. The Common Core State Standards, which ACT helped develop, are raising the bar. We at ACT are developing a number of solutions to help students get and stay on track for success, including our new ACT Aspire™ assessment system.”

ACT research suggests that earlier monitoring and intervention are crucial elements to improving student readiness for success after high school.

“It is critical that we identify and address problems in academic achievement early in a student’s academic career, so that they can get on track for readiness as soon as possible,” said Jon Erickson, ACT president of education. “This is not about college readiness alone but about readiness for taking the next step, whether it’s entering the workforce, attending a trade school, or enrolling in a two- or four-year college or university.”

Science remains the subject area in which students are least likely to be ready for college-level work; just 36 percent of test takers achieved the ACT College Readiness Benchmark in science. ACT is doing extensive research on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) in our schools and plans to release a report on the condition of the STEM pipeline later this year.

Largest, Most Diverse Group of Test Takers Ever

The ACT report examines the ACT scores of a record 1.8 million students, 54 percent of the U.S. graduating class. It was the largest and most diverse group of graduates ever to take the ACT, the nation’s leading college entrance exam, and also likely the broadest in terms of academic preparation. This is due in part to an increase in the number of states and districts that administer the ACT to all students, not just those who were preparing to go to college. This year’s report includes 29 states in which 50 percent or more of graduates took the ACT and 12 states in which 90 percent or more took the assessment. As more students take the ACT, the data obtained from scores better reflect the entire U.S. graduating class, providing a glimpse of the emerging educational pipeline.

Changes in Report Composition

The report notes some changes that affect the ability to make direct comparisons in some areas.

ACT updated the ACT College Readiness Benchmarks this year to ensure that they remain reflective of college success. These updates were based on gradual changes identified through ACT's routine practice of monitoring the predictive validity of the ACT. As a result, two benchmark scores were adjusted: The benchmark score in reading went up by 1 point on the 1 to 36 scoring scale, while the score in science went down by 1 point. The English and math benchmarks remained the same.

In addition, college-reportable scores for all accommodated students were included in the ACT report this year for the first time. In prior years, scores for students receiving time-extended accommodations were not included in the summary reporting.

About the ACT

The ACT is a curriculum-based achievement assessment that measures the skills taught in schools and deemed important for success in first-year college courses. The content of the ACT is informed by results of ACT's exclusive National Curriculum Survey[®], which is conducted every three to four years among thousands of elementary, middle and high school teachers and instructors of first-year college courses across the United States. The data obtained in the survey allow ACT to ensure that its assessments measure the skills most important for success after high school.

The national and state ACT *Condition of College & Career Readiness 2013* reports can be viewed and downloaded for free on the ACT website at the following URL: www.act.org/readiness/2013.

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ACT is a mission-driven, nonprofit organization dedicated to helping people achieve education and workplace success. Headquartered in Iowa City, Iowa, ACT is trusted as the nation's leader in college and career readiness, providing high-quality achievement assessments grounded in more than 50 years of research and experience. ACT offers a uniquely integrated continuum of solutions that help people succeed from kindergarten through career, providing insights that unlock potential. To learn more about ACT, go to www.act.org.

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