

In Their Own Words: Reasons for Test-Day Absenteeism Among Students Who Registered for the ACT with a Fee Waiver

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Introduction

This is the fourth report in a series of studies we are conducting to investigate ACT's fee waiver program. In our first brief, *Use of Fee Waivers to Register for the ACT*, we found that the share of ACT® registrations completed with a fee waiver has remained relatively consistent over recent years; currently, about one out of five registrations for the ACT is completed with a fee waiver.¹ Although there is some variation in fee waiver usage across test dates in a given school year and across US states, we found that, overall, ACT's fee waiver program appears to be reaching its intended recipients, i.e., students who have been traditionally underrepresented in higher education. Specifically, students who come from lower-income families and those who would be first-generation college students were more likely than their peers to use fee waivers to register for the ACT.

In our second brief, *Test-Day Absenteeism Among Students Who Registered for the ACT with a Fee Waiver*, we reported on the large discrepancy in test-day absenteeism between fee-waived and paid registrations.² To recap, we found that about three out of ten fee-waived registrations typically led to a test-day absence, compared to about one out of ten paid registrations, and this gap appeared to be increasing over time. Further, we found that the very students who are targeted by ACT's fee waiver program, because they come from populations traditionally underserved in education, were more likely than their peers to be absent on test day.

In our third brief, *Test History of Test-Day Absentees Who Registered for the ACT with a Fee Waiver*, we found that absent students who registered for the ACT using a fee waiver were less likely than absent students who paid the registration fee to test on a prior or subsequent test date within a three-year period.³ A little over one-half of test-day absentees who registered using a fee waiver never tested during that timeframe, compared to one-quarter of absentees who paid to register.

Although the three prior reports in this series provide valuable descriptive information about ACT fee waiver usage and test-day absenteeism among students who use fee waivers, we wanted to hear directly from students who registered for the ACT with a fee waiver about their reasons for not testing as initially scheduled. We hope that this research will help inform policy changes at national, state, and local levels that can address the potential challenges that these students must overcome in order to test on their initially scheduled test date. This research will also inform how ACT moves forward in providing support to students who register for the ACT using a fee waiver.

To capture students' own words about the reasons for their test-day absence, we sent survey invitations in the weeks following the October 2019 National test date to students who had registered with a fee waiver for that test date by the regular registration deadline. On this National test date, 28% of test-takers used a fee waiver to register for the test. Out of these 114,337 students who registered for this test date using a fee waiver, 28%, or 32,097 students, did not test on that day. From this target population, we emailed surveys to a sample of 26,065 students (81%); 3,254 of these sampled students participated in our survey, for a 12.4% response rate.⁴ In comparison, 12% of students who paid the registration fee were absent on the day of the test.

We asked our survey respondents through an open-ended question to explain, in as much detail as possible, the reason or reasons for their absence on the October 2019 National test date. We then presented them with a list of reasons and asked them to choose the option that best represented their open-ended response (with “some other reason” included). We also asked them to indicate at what point they knew they would be unable to take the test and, if that point was on the day of the test, whether they realized before or after arriving at the testing center. In this report, we will highlight the major themes in the students’ responses to these questions, using their own words to provide more vivid illustrations of the constraints that they faced on or before their scheduled test date. Our findings include:

- Despite not testing on their scheduled test date, respondents to our survey overwhelmingly believed that taking the ACT was important to help them meet their future goals and that the fee waiver was important in helping them overcome the financial burden of taking the ACT.
- The most frequently chosen reason that students reported for being absent on their test date was needing to be somewhere else that day (nearly one in four). In their written responses, these students often indicated that they had a sudden emergency. However, some students appeared to have known conflicts that most often could have been avoided.
- The second most common reason was not having all the materials needed to take the test (about one in six). These students gave a variety of examples for why they lacked the necessary materials, including difficulty uploading their photo, not having access to a valid photo ID, and not having a printer to print the admission ticket.
- Other reasons that students reported for their absence often coincided with the timing of when students realized that they would be unable to take the test. For example, oversleeping and a lack of transportation were reasons that largely occurred on the day of the test. In particular, roughly one out of eight survey respondents indicated that they did not have a way to get to the test center. While some students reported not having a driver or a car to take them to the test center, other students indicated that they had car problems on the way to the test center or failed to show up because of inclement weather.
- Although not as common as other reasons for test-day absenteeism, about one out of 14 students did not test on their originally scheduled test day because they felt unprepared to take the test, which generally occurred before the day of the test. These students gave various examples of what they meant by feeling unprepared, with some indicating they had anxiety about taking the test while others indicated feeling that they had not studied enough.

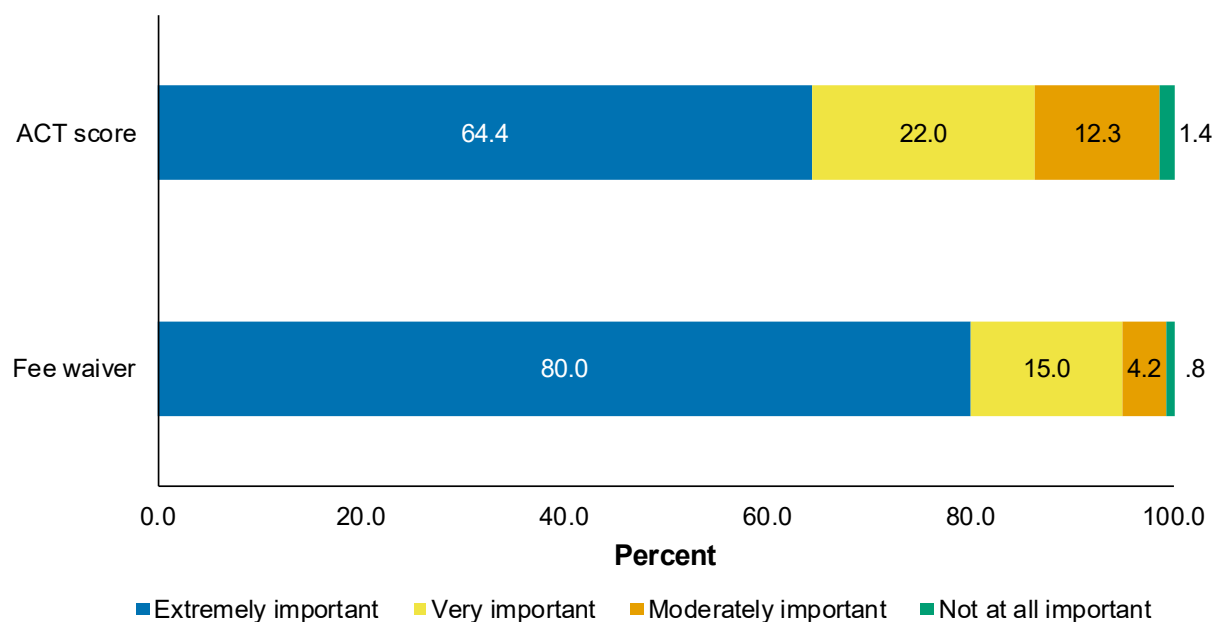
Finally, this report offers recommendations to policymakers and educators at the state, district, and school levels. These recommendations focus on how all students, particularly those eligible for fee waivers, can be supported in their journey towards college and career readiness. We end with how ACT is taking steps to address some of these challenges.

The Importance of the ACT Test and a Fee Waiver

Taking the ACT is an important step in the college-going process. Over 1,500 colleges across the US, educating approximately 1.5 million first-time degree-seeking undergraduates, either require, recommend, or consider test scores as a criterion for admissions decisions.⁵ Likewise, many academic scholarships require a standardized assessment score as part of the application process.

Although our survey respondents did not take the ACT on their scheduled test date, a clear majority of these students understood the value of taking the test in order to expand their access to postsecondary educational opportunities. More than four out of five students who participated in this survey indicated that earning an ACT score was either “extremely” or “very” important to their future goals (Figure 1). These students also understood the value of the fee waiver in granting them access to the ACT test. Indeed, 95% indicated that the fee waiver was “extremely” or “very” important because it made it financially possible for them to register for the test.

Figure 1. Importance of an ACT Score and Fee Waiver to Students



Primary Reasons for Not Taking the ACT

We asked students to select one of 11 statements that best described their primary reason for failing to take the ACT as scheduled in October 2019.⁶ Figure 2 summarizes students' responses. As is evident from the figure, there was no dominate reason for failing to take the test: Students had varied reasons for their absence. Among the more prominent reasons, almost one in four students (23.9%) indicated that they needed to be somewhere else that day, whereas 17% of students indicated that they did not have all the materials they needed to take the test. Another 13.6% reported being sick or injured, and 12.1% did not have transportation to the test center. Less than 10% of the respondents selected each of the other primary reasons for their absence.

Figure 2. Students' Primary Reason for Not Taking the ACT



Note. Approximately half of the students who originally chose “some other reason” were recoded into one of the other reasons based on their open-ended responses. Most students were recoded into “I needed to be somewhere else that day” followed by “I didn't have all the materials I needed to take the test.” The recoded responses are presented in this figure.

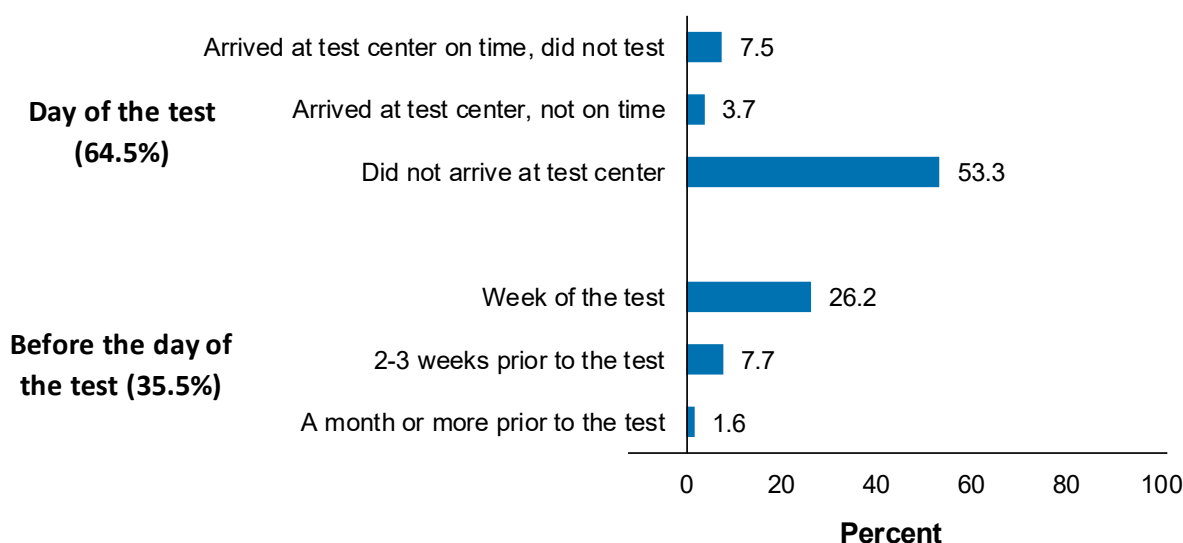
* Reasons for students' absenteeism that might result in an increase in students taking the test should actions be taken by ACT, policymakers, educators, and others.

When Students Realized They Would Not Take the ACT as Scheduled

We asked students to indicate when they first knew that they would not test on their scheduled test date. Students could select from the day of the test, the week of the test, 2-3 weeks prior to the test, or a month or more prior to the test. Although more than a third of students (35.4%) knew before the day of the test that they would not be testing,

nearly two out of three of our respondents (64.6%) only realized the day of the test that they would not be taking the ACT as initially planned (Figure 3). More than half of all respondents (53.3%) knew on the day of the test and did not show up to the test center. A total of 7.5% of the absentee students who participated in the survey arrived at the test center on time but were still unable to test. Of those students who showed up on time, the prevailing reason given for being unable to take the test was that students did not have all the materials they needed to take the test (73.8%); a smaller share of these students (8.5%) indicated that they had an incorrect test location or test date.

Figure 3. When Students Realized They Would Not Take the ACT



Note. A few students (n=37) did not answer this question.

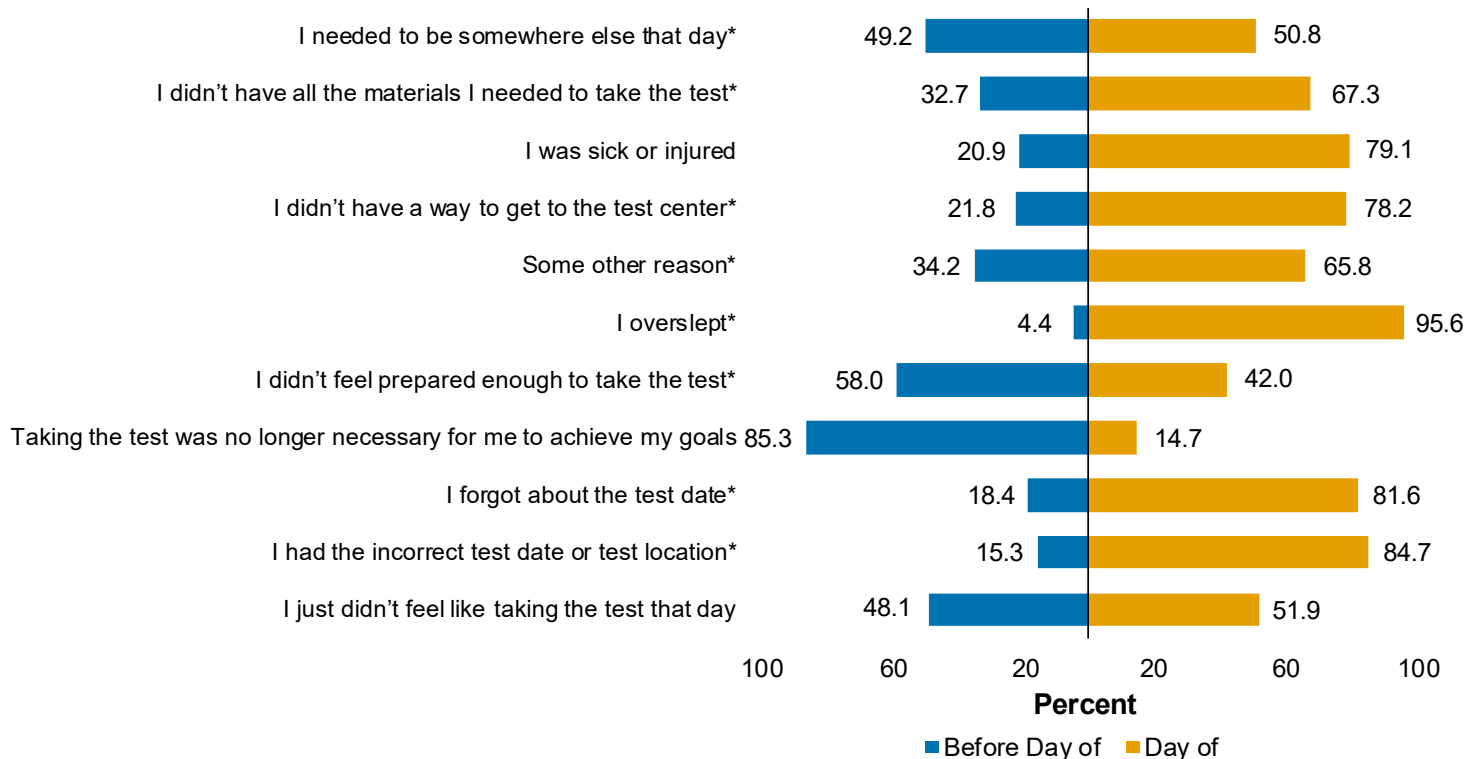
There appeared to be racial differences in when students realized they would not take the ACT as scheduled. African American students were more likely to not know until the day of the test that they would be unable to take the test (70.1% compared to 56.6% Asian, 60.9% Hispanic, and 64.2% White). There were no differences by gender, parental educational level, or students' expected education level in terms of when students realized they would be unable to take the test.

Aligning Students' Primary Reason for Not Taking the ACT With the Point at Which They Knew

When students realized they would not be taking the test (i.e., on the day of the test or prior to test day) largely depended on their primary reason for not taking the ACT. For example, eight out of 10 students who reported forgetting about the test date (81.6%) realized they would not take the test on the test day. A total of 85.3% of students who said that taking the ACT was no longer necessary to achieve their goals knew before the test day they would not take the test. On the other hand, there was an approximately 50% split between the day of and before the day of for those students who indicated they were unable to take the ACT because they needed to somewhere

else that day; a similar pattern emerged for those students who said they did not feel prepared to take the test.

Figure 4. The Point at Which Students Realized They Would Not Take the ACT by Their Primary Reason for Not Taking It



* Reasons for students' absenteeism that might result in an increase in students taking the test should actions be taken by ACT, policymakers, educators, and others.

Note. It is unclear why 4.4% of oversleeping students indicated that they knew before the day of the test that they would do so. Perhaps these students had no general interest in taking the test or that they have a habit of oversleeping. It is also possible that some students did not read the survey question correctly or carefully enough to provide an accurate response.

In the following sections, we elaborate on students' primary reasons for absenteeism where interventions provided by ACT, policymakers, educators, and others might increase students' completion of the ACT on their scheduled National test date (indicated by an * in Figures 2 and 4).⁷ We order these reasons from most to least frequently reported. For each reason, we summarize students' open-ended responses. We also reiterate the percentage of students who chose that reason, and, where appropriate, whether the timing when students realized they would not take the test was informed by the reason for students' absenteeism. Differences by demographic groups (e.g., race, gender, parental education) are also highlighted.

I Needed to Be Somewhere Else That Day

Nearly one in four students (23.9%) said that they needed to be somewhere else the day of the test. Out of this group, 677 (out of 707) students provided open-ended

responses describing where they needed to be and why. One out of three Hispanic students (30%) chose this as their reason for not take the ACT, compared to 22.7% of White students, 20% of Asian students, and 19.1% of African American students. Students who gave this reason were more likely to have lower expected educational levels after high school: 27.9% of those students who do not plan to attend college said that they needed to be somewhere else, while 24.4% of aspiring bachelor's degree students and 22% of aspiring graduate degree students chose this response.

Of the students who chose this reason for their absence, about half had a known schedule conflict prior to their test date (49.2%), whereas about half had a day-of emergency (50.8%; see Figure 4) that precluded them from testing as scheduled. We highlight these two major categories below.

An Emergency Occurred the Day of the Test

Many of the students who said they had an emergency the day of the test provided examples such as a “family emergency” or “I had a last-minute family issue” but did not provide any further explanation.⁸ Other students elaborated further. The quote below illustrates a common response, where a family member got sick, was hospitalized, or passed away on the day of the test and, given the gravity of the situation, it was more important for the student to attend to the emergency than to take the ACT:

That same day, early in the a.m., my family got a call that my great-grandmother got sick and she ended up in the emergency room; you only have one great-grandmother in life but ACT tests there's a lot.

A Schedule Conflict

Other students realized that they had a schedule conflict prior to the test day. These events were most often ones that either required attendance (e.g., JROTC event or drill, a marching band competition, a sports event, work) and/or were an experience that was of more importance than taking the ACT (e.g., a campus visit). With respect to the former issue, one example of a student response is, “I had a technical rehearsal I had to do. I was required to attend,” while the latter issue can be illustrated by this comment: “I found out that I was going on a college visit to [college name].”

Some students articulated their reasoning for the decision to choose the conflicting event over taking the ACT. One student explained this in generic terms:

The reason for my absence during the October test was to attend an event that was scheduled at a similar time. I chose to attend this event with the idea of it currently being my final year in high school and attempting to make memories before my graduation. I am aware and fully understand that this is not an excuse for my absence.

In general, students reasoned that the ACT could be rescheduled but the competing event could not be. Many of these students acknowledged that registering for a later test date could also be done with a fee waiver. A second free test provided additional motivation for attending the alternative event.

Other students described how the conflicts came about. For example, certain sports event conflicts came about because previous wins dictate future sports events like semi-finals and finals. These events were not scheduled prior to their ACT registration and when the time came, a conflict arose. Occasionally, students indicated that they were only told about the other event after they had already registered for the test. One student explained, “I am a dancer. Our coach sent me my schedule after I registered for the test, so I had a competition the same day.”

I Didn't Have All the Materials (Ticket, Photo ID) That I Needed to Take the Test

A total of 17% of students indicated they didn't have all of the materials they needed to take the test. This was the second most frequently reported reason for being unable to take the ACT. Of these students, about one-third knew they were missing some of their required test materials before the test date, whereas two-thirds did not know until the test date. We highlight how timing and this reason are related.

Uploading a Picture

One of the most frequently reported materials students reported not having, but needed in order to take the test, was uploading their picture before the deadline. Many of these students reported struggling to upload a picture either because of technical problems or because they did not know how to do so. A student with technical problems simply said, “It wouldn't let me upload my picture,” while a student who lacked an understanding of how to upload a picture said, “I didn't understand how to get my picture uploaded. And when I tried to go to my counselor at school to help me, she was gone.” Other students said that they were unaware that this was a required step in the registration process. One comment illustrates this issue:

I heard from a valuable source that you need to submit a picture of yourself and that if I didn't submit a picture that I couldn't take the test, so I didn't show up.

Other students were aware that a picture was required but simply missed the deadline to upload. The deadline for uploading a valid picture is at least eight days before the day of the test, so students who lacked a picture were notified of their canceled registration before the day of the exam.

No Valid Photo ID

While an uploaded picture is required during the registration process, students are also required to bring a valid photo ID with them to the testing center in order to verify

their identity. While a few students reported realizing before the day of the test that they did not have a valid photo ID, the vast majority of students told us that it wasn't until they arrived at the test center that they realized they didn't have the appropriate identification to enter. A few student quotes illustrate this issue:

- “I showed up for my test but I didn't have an ID, so I was sent home.”
- “I had my driver's license on the LA wallet app, but they would not accept it because it wasn't a hard copy.”
- “When I showed up to take the test my learner's permit was expired and I don't have my license yet, so I thought that my permit would be fine but they said it wasn't so I had to exit the test center.”
- “The reason that I was not able to take my test was because I showed up with my school student ID from sophomore year because I was unable to find mine from junior year and the administrator said that it was expired. I was unaware that my school student ID could expire.”
- “I wasn't able to take the ACT on October 26 due to the fact that I lost my ID. I had a picture of it, but they would not accept it. I also took a hospital work ID, which is considered a state ID, but they didn't accept it due to the fact that it didn't have my last name. Which was stupid because it had my first name and a picture with my face on it.”

Printing the Admission Ticket

Students indicated that they had forgotten to print their ticket, didn't know they needed to print their ticket, or lacked a printer to print their ticket. Difficulties with printing an admission ticket were reported both before the day of and on the day of testing. Generally, students indicated that they waited until the last minute (e.g., the day or night before the test, the morning of the test) before reviewing and trying to print their ticket.

The most frequently stated reason when it came to not having an admission ticket was that the student did not have a working printer to print the admission ticket. One student said, “This day I didn't get my ticket printed due to the lack of working printers all over the school.” Another student tried to solve this issue by relying on someone else to print their admission ticket, stating, “I did not have a printer at home and my friend said she was going to bring the ticket, but she did not show up.” Of less frequency, but still worth mentioning, some students said they weren't aware they needed a printed admission ticket to take the test. One student said:

I wasn't aware that I had to print a paper ticket out and the night before at 10 pm I was informed by a friend that I needed it. I couldn't get my printer to work and gave up at midnight.

I Didn't Have a Way to Get to the Test Center

A total of 359 students (12.1%) indicated that their primary reason for not taking the ACT was because they did not have a way to get to the test center. This was the fourth most frequently reported reason for failing to take the test, with many students (78.2%) who chose this reason indicating that it was not until the day of the test that they knew they would be unable to take the test. There was also a disproportionate percentage of African American/Black (16%) and Hispanic (11%) students who said they did not have a way to the test center compared to Asian (6%) and White (8%) students.⁹

Many students who indicated that they didn't have a way to get to the test center simply provided a general statement about a lack of transportation being their reason. For example, one student said, "I didn't have transportation," while another said, "I didn't have a ride." Other students, however, provided more details behind their lack of transportation. Four, often interdependent, reasons emerged.

No Driver

Several students who didn't have a way to the test center indicated that they were unable to take the ACT because they did not have someone to drive them to the testing center. One reason given for this was because students failed to communicate or coordinate with a friend or family member who might drive them. For example, one student said, "I woke up at 6am to be ready to leave the house at 7am but I forgot I had no ride..." More often, however, students indicated that they had arranged a ride, but the ride fell through—most often because the driver had a higher priority event come up. Two students expressed this issue well:

I didn't go because I didn't have anyone to take me ... because my guardian got called into work, which is the reason I couldn't take the test.

I live approximately a 45-minute drive away from my test center and my parents were not able to take me on the day of my test to the test center because their supervisor did not grant them permission to miss work.

Less frequent, but still of importance, were students who reported that their driver either just didn't want to take them to the test center or that their driver had forgotten. One student put it this way: "My mother refused to wake up. I can't drive so I wasn't able to drive myself. If I could have, I would have." Another student said:

I didn't have a ride to go; my mom is the only parent and she was at work. I had already reminded her that I was taking the test but she had forgotten and didn't get home from work till 12 in the afternoon.

No Car or Other Resources

Students who had a driver's license indicated that the car they had planned to use was not available at the time of the test. One student said:

I has woken up prepared to take the test and grabbed everything to find that my father's car was missing. I usually drive his car since I do not have my own and it turns out that my father took it up ... to get it serviced and my mother was at work already, so I could not take her car either. They had forgotten I had the ACT and did not answer my calls up until 12 p.m. that day.

Similarly, other students who had a car available reported not being able to use it due to a lack of money for gas. One student said, "I could not get a way down to [the testing center] that morning on my own due to not having gas money."

Car Problems

Most students who reported car problems indicated that they experienced these problems on the test day, although a few indicated that the car problems started a few days before. One student said, "I did not make it to the testing site due to transportation and car problems the morning of the test." Another student indicated, "On the morning of the ACT, my mother's truck had a flat tire, and my car wouldn't start. I tried to call other people for a ride, but unfortunately I could not get one."

Inclement Weather

Another issue was inclement weather. Specifically, when there was bad weather, the person expected to take the student to the test center was not able to do so. This was reported less frequently than the previously reported transportation issues. For example, one student said:

I was planning on taking the test at [test center site] which is miles away from where I live. I woke up expecting to get a ride to the college. With the recent weather being very rainy, I was unable to get a ride to the test area because of the danger of driving in that type of weather.

A few students indicated that the weather made it too difficult to walk to the test center. One student said:

I did not attend my ACT session due to the extreme weather. The only way that I could get to my designated site was by walking and the weather was too dangerous for me to go out.

Transportation issues often emerged when the test center location was far away from the student's home and school. For example, one student stated, "I didn't have a ride to the test taking center. I live about an hour away from it and at the moment had no transportation."

Interestingly, despite these transportation challenges, some students provided ways in which they tried to solve their issues. For example, one student said:

That morning our car wouldn't start, and when I checked to see if public transportation was available the bus had already passed by; therefore, it would be another hour till it passed again. I was ready to take the test, but unfortunately wasn't able to make it.

Other students said they tried to get an Uber or Lyft, asked neighbors for a ride, or tried to find bus money to take public transportation, but were ultimately unsuccessful.

Some Other Reason

A total of 9% of students indicated that there was some other reason for their inability to take the ACT as scheduled. Most of these reasons were not tied to any action for improvement on the part of ACT, educators, or policymakers and are therefore omitted.¹⁰ However, there were two frequently cited reasons that could lead to actionable change.

Parking and/or Navigating to the Building or Room

Many of the students who chose “some other reason” indicated in their open-ended responses that they could not find a place to park and/or they got lost trying to find the building or room where the test was to take place. For example, one student explained:

I had arrived to [testing location] approximately 10 minutes earlier than the scheduled testing time. The school was simply way too big and confusing for me to find my class. I asked for help finding my classroom and got no assistance, therefore by the time I actually found my assigned classroom I was already too late. This was extremely disappointing for me because I drove over an hour to attend this test.

Another student, like a few others, experienced both problems. This student said:

I planned to attend, but due to not being able to find a parking spot or the building I did not make it to the testing center on time.

Test Accommodations Were Not Provided or Were Not Given

Some students indicate that they did not take the ACT because their requested accommodations were not approved or because the person who was to provide the accommodations was not available. With respect to the former issue, one student said:

I had forwarded the email to my school counselor about getting my test accommodations, however, she did not receive it in time for the test. She told me to reschedule...

With respect to the latter issue, one student explained:

The teacher who would've been giving me my extended time accommodations wasn't able to attend that day due to soccer, so we had to reschedule.

I Overslept

Fewer students, but a still meaningful number (n=206), indicated that they did not take the ACT because they overslept. This was the seventh most frequently reported reason for not being able to take the ACT, with 7% of students naming it as the primary cause

of their absenteeism. While a small percentage of overall students chose this reason, there were more Asian students (9.8%) and African American students (8.5%) relative to White (5.0%) and Hispanic (5.7%) students who chose this response.

A common open-ended response in the survey was typified by, “I did not take the ACT because I woke up late.” This was often because either the student did not set their alarm or their alarm did not go off because their phone battery had fully discharged in the middle of the night.

Other students indicated that they were up late the night before, either because of a pre-scheduled event (e.g., band, football game, work) or because they were nervous about taking the test. A few examples in the students’ own words are given below.

I had my homecoming on October 25, I won homecoming queen and I went to sleep late and I didn’t wake up on time. I missed my test!

My extra-curricular activities that I participated in kept me from returning home until late the night before the test. When I returned, however, I forgot to set my alarm for the morning of the test and subsequently woke up after the test had begun.

I knew I had a test on October 26 but at that time on October 25th I went to work and work ran late, so I went home at 12:35 a.m. and I didn’t go to sleep until 1:27 a.m. Because I forgot to set my alarm clock on my phone, to wake me up in the morning, when I woke up it was 9:00 a.m. and I was kinda upset with myself. It was my responsibility to wake up Education is more important than work—than everything—so that’s why I couldn’t make it to the test.

I Didn’t Feel Prepared Enough to Take the Test

Some students who knew prior to test day that they would be unable to test as scheduled indicated that they decided not to take the test because they didn’t feel prepared. A total of 206 students (7%) indicated that this was the primary reason for their not testing.¹¹ As we will highlight below, students offered varying definitions of “prepared” in their open-ended responses.

Stressed or Anxious About the Test

Some students indicated that they were stressed or anxious about taking the test, and, because of that heightened anxiety, they did not feel prepared to take the exam in October. For example, one student said, “I got nervous and I didn’t feel ready to take the ACT.” Due to this nervousness, students indicated that they were just “not in the right mental space” to test.

Life Events Were a Distraction

Likewise, some students indicated that they were ill-prepared for the test because they had other events going on in their life. Because of these conflicts, they did not feel that they were in the right mental space to take an important exam like the ACT. Two comments illustrate this point: “I participated in a late football game and I felt like I was

not mentally prepared for the test,” and “I had a hard week and wasn’t mentally capable to take a big exam.”

A Need to Study the Content

Many of the students who indicated they were not prepared said that they did not take the test because they did not allocate enough time for studying. A student said, “I need a little bit more study time before I take the test.” Some students emphasized that they needed more time to study for the mathematics section in particular, especially specific math content (e.g., algebra) that they had not been exposed to in school. For example, one student who emphasized the need to study for the math section said:

I wasn’t able to take the test because I believed that I wasn’t ready for the math section specifically. I thought I would be able to take it and study in the time that I had, but due to my math skills being a little low, I feel I wasn’t ready.

Many students provided reasons for why they were unable to study, including that they were balancing other obligations and studying was not always a priority. One student said:

The reason I was unable to take the test was because I had a lot of events going on at school. I am part of the associated student body and we had rallies, senior nights, and homecoming to prep for. I wasn’t able to study for the ACT although I wish I would’ve prioritized my time better.

Other students said they were too busy with college applications, homework, sports practices, or work obligations. As a result, some students changed their test date to allow for more studying:

A few days after I signed up, I realized how little time I’d get to study. I decided not to take the Oct 26th test so I can study more for the Dec 14th test.

Students Had Not Done Well in Test Preparation Activities

A small number of students indicated that they knew they weren’t prepared to take the test because they had not done well in certain test preparation activities, including practice ACT tests:

I actually had many reasons for not taking the ACT test on October 26. One of the main reasons was that I wasn’t as ready as I thought I was. I used online ACT practice tests & I wasn’t making the scores I wanted. I’m going to study to be able to take every other ACT that comes.

A few students said that they had taken an online test preparation class and had realized that they were not as prepared as they had thought.

We asked students about the three free test preparation resources available to them (in October 2019) from ACT: ACT® Online Prep, ACT® Academy™, and ACT® Rapid Review™. A majority of students reported not knowing they had access to these three

test preparation resources, while between 11% and 28%, depending on the product, had used each, with 44.4% of students overall reporting using at least one type of free test prep from ACT.

Free Test Prep from ACT

As of September 2020, all students registering for the ACT using a fee waiver receive free access to ACT's Official ACT Self-Paced Course for one year beginning from their date of registration (as early as July of the academic year in which they are testing) for each fee waiver. This resource offers students short pre-recorded video lessons on any skills they may need to review, in addition to practice ACT tests and questions and a built-in course syllabus. However, only 57.4% of surveyed students registering with a fee waiver knew that they had free access to any paid test preparation from ACT.¹²

I Forgot About the Test Date

A few students (n=87, or 2.9% of all students) simply forgot about the test date.¹³ One student put it this way: "I didn't realize what day it was and forgot to take it." Other students indicated that they had other things on their mind; for instance, "I forgot all about the test; I had been practicing for our Veterans Day performance and practicing for our upcoming competition. It slipped my mind at the time, and I have been trying to figure out if I can still take the test." Of note, some students thought that they were scheduled to take the test during the week and hadn't realized that the test date was on a weekend.¹⁴

I misunderstood the date of the test; I realized that I thought the test was on the next Monday, not on a Sunday. I understand that it was my responsibility, and I would like to take the test anytime necessary.

We initially thought that students might have forgotten about the test date because someone else had registered them.¹⁵ However, almost all (99%) of the students who selected this reason for their test absence were involved in some way with registering themselves for the test.

I Had the Incorrect Test Date or Test Location

A total of 85 students (2.9%) indicated that they did not take the ACT because they had either the incorrect test date or the incorrect test location; fewer students indicated they had the incorrect start time for the test. This was the 10th-most reported reason out of the 11 reasons provided.¹⁶ Many responses revealed that students had not read the

ACT admission ticket in detail, while other responses reflected a miscommunication between the student and ACT in the testing location. Most students giving this reason for their absence from the test did not realize until the day of the test because it was not until then that the students looked at their admission ticket. Below, we categorize and summarize this reason for students' absenteeism.

Students Thought They Had Signed Up for a Different Date, Location, or Time

Many students who reported this reason for being absent indicated that they thought they had signed up for the December 2019 test, not the October 2019 National test date. One student said it well: "When I signed up, I'm sure I signed up to take the December test. I didn't know I was signing up for the October test." Another student said:

I had signed up for the December ACT because I knew I wasn't ready nor would be able to make the October test and it was already late registration. A week before the test, I saw that I was scheduled for October and when I tried to switch my test center was no longer available for December.

Students who said that they had signed up for the wrong location or had the wrong time also typically stated that they noticed this issue the day of the test, often when they arrived at the wrong test center and/or at the wrong time. For example, one student who had the wrong location said:

I was rushed and believed I had signed up for the test center I was heading to but did not check my ticket to see the location. Thus, at the last minute when the test started, an administrator advised me that I was indeed in the wrong test center. So a couple of students and I rushed to the correct center and were told that the test started 30 minutes prior and it was too late to take the test.

Another student who had the wrong time said:

I had signed up to take the test at 10 a.m., I was sure I was going to take the test at 10 a.m. I got there around 9:30 a.m. and sat around and waited. Then I realized when I saw my ticket that it was at 8 a.m. I was about an hour late. I wasn't sure if I was still allowed to go in and take the test.

Other students who had the wrong location simply assumed that they knew where they were taking the test because they thought that the location would be the same regardless of when they took the test or which standardized test they were taking. It was not until they arrived to test that they realized they were not at their scheduled location. One student explained:

I had previously taken the ACT at [school A] High School as a testing center and many other SATs. This October's ACT, I registered for [school B]'s high school as my testing center, but when it came to testing day I did not bother looking where my testing center was, and assumed it was [school A], out of routine. When I headed over to [school A], I was told my testing center was back in [school B location], so

when I got to my designated testing center, it was too late and was not allowed in because students had started testing. It was 8:20AM when I arrived at [school B].

Occasionally, students said that someone else had registered them and that person chose the wrong test date. However, almost all students (99%) who participated in the survey and who said they had the incorrect location or date indicated they were involved with registering themselves for the ACT.

Students Were Aware of Their Testing Location but Went to a Different Location with a Similar Name

Interestingly, some students were aware of their testing location, but there was more than one location with the same or a similar name. A few students illustrate this issue well:

I woke up ready to take the ACT on the day of the test. However, there were two schools with the same name. One was closer and the other was about 40 minutes away and I did not pay attention to the address since I did not know there were different schools with the same name. I realized that I definitely wouldn't make it on time and decided to not take the test.

My test taking center was "[school name] School" and I mistakenly showed up to "[school name] High School." They wouldn't let me take the test at [school name] High School because it wasn't my designated test-taking center, so I had to go home.

Students' Test Center Location Was Changed

A few students also said that their testing location was changed without their knowledge:

I was unable to take the test because of a mix-up with the information given. The testing location had changed between the date of the test and when I had registered, so I had two different tickets with two different locations. When I asked my advisor, he had apparently heard nothing of the change and had given me the incorrect information. Then, when I had realized we were at the wrong location, the new location was too far away to make it in time. Time being something I didn't have very much of when I had to attend my sister's wedding on the same day.

What is on an ACT Admission Ticket?

The first section of the ACT admission ticket contains the student's photo, name, and birthdate; the date and starting time of the test (though students should plan to arrive at least 30 minutes early); the test center name and address, including directions on which door to enter and notes on where to park and enter, if applicable; instructions on what to do upon arrival at the testing center; and the type of test (e.g., with writing) the student is registered for.

Additional boxes cover:

- Test day policies, including the important note that students cannot use any electronic device from the time they enter their testing room until they are dismissed (including breaks).
- What to bring, including acceptable photo ID (and a reminder of what types of ID are acceptable), the admission ticket itself, pencils, calculators, a watch, and a snack.
- What not to bring, including electronic devices (except for approved calculators).
- Test day match info, which the student will need to enter onto their ACT test form exactly as the information appears in order to ensure that the reporting of their scores is not delayed.

As we look to use our findings from the research detailed in earlier reports from this series as well as the insights gathered directly from the affected students, ACT will be taking action as we work to lessen those barriers to ACT test attendance that are within our power to help mitigate. We also offer recommendations for other key stakeholders, and hope that you will join us in working to increase attendance rates at scheduled ACT National test dates, particularly for those students registering for the test using a fee waiver.

Recommendations for...

State and Local Policymakers

Adopt School-Day Testing

Provide all students with an ACT test during a normal school day—at no charge to them, without requiring them to seek out a fee waiver and register on their own—in order to mitigate many of the challenges students faced in testing as scheduled (as well as the any impediments faced by students who did not even take that first step

to register). Research has suggested that school-day testing is one of the least expensive ways to increase college-going rates.¹⁷ Testing on a regular school day increases the chances that:

1. Students have transportation to the test center on test day, as they can take the school bus or their other typical transportation to school and do not have to worry about arranging transportation on their own. This prevents students from having to test at locations that may be far from their homes.
2. Students wake up and arrive on time on test day, since they are (hopefully) in the habit of arriving to school on time and will not be derailed by weekend conflicts that may increase their likelihood of oversleeping.
3. Students do not have to worry about remembering their test date; if students are at school and all students are testing, it is far more difficult for them to forget about their test.
4. Students do not have to worry about having the wrong test location or date, or being unable to find a parking spot. If students are already at school, these issues cannot occur. In addition, students will know the building and therefore will find it easier to locate their designated testing room. In fact, a few students expressed wishing that their schools offered testing to avoid different barriers to testing as scheduled.

Hire More School Counselors

Fund increased counseling capacity, particularly at schools serving high numbers of students from low-income families, so that with a lower student-to-counselor ratio, school counselors have more capacity to address each student's individual needs and ensure they are on a path to post-high school success.

Equip Students with Tools to Reduce Stress and Anxiety

Allocate resources to reducing student stress, including relevant professional development for educators, increased counseling capacity, and curricula that emphasize social and emotional learning as well as academics. Because social and emotional skills are imperative to ensuring students can succeed academically, students should be equipped with tools to reduce stress and anxiety, including strategies for dealing with full schedules and competing demands, as well as any anxiety they may be experiencing throughout the college application process.

Provide Transportation

Make funding available to provide transportation to students on weekend test dates, particularly those students who have registered for the ACT using a fee waiver.

Principals

Adopt School-Day Testing

If the state or district do not provide school-day testing to all students, arrange such testing at a single school for the reasons stated above.

Work with ACT to Register Your School as a Saturday Test Center

Register your school as an ACT test center on one or more Saturdays throughout the school year; this can also be completed so the test center is open only to students at your school.¹⁸ Though this will not remove all transportation barriers, being able to test at their own school can help students who might otherwise struggle with arriving at the correct location, parking, finding their assigned room, and other hurdles to testing. It may also make it easier to find transportation to the test center, if necessary.

Emphasize the ACT's Importance

Reiterate the importance of testing as scheduled to students and parents, as well as staff—including theatre and band directors, coaches, and others—to ensure that students are able to make the ACT test a priority and that fewer conflicts emerge. Test dates are released well before the start of the school year, and principals can post these dates on the school website, mark them on the school's calendar, and work with school staff to avoid potential conflicts well before they happen, helping to ensure that students are able to take the ACT as well as participate in their chosen extracurriculars.¹⁹

Incorporate ACT-Tested Foundational Knowledge into Academics

Work to incorporate the foundational skills measured by the ACT into multiple classes students are already taking and/or create separate in-school ACT preparation sessions, guaranteeing equitable access and increasing students' feelings of readiness while reducing potential anxiety over their level of preparation. To further reduce potential anxiety, preparation can also include reviewing how to read an admission ticket and ensuring that students know and can access everything they will need on test day.

Equip Students with Tools to Reduce Stress and Anxiety

Ensure staff have the necessary resources to equip students with the tools they need to help them in times of stress and anxiety, including curricula that emphasize social and emotional learning as well as academics. As noted above, some students experience anxiety and stress as they balance their high school coursework and the college application process, and all students need strategies to address everyday stressors.

Provide Transportation

Make funding available, potentially in conjunction with community organizations, to provide transportation to students on weekend test dates, particularly those students who have registered for the ACT using a fee waiver.²⁰

School Counselors and Teachers

Make a Plan with Students

Work with students (and parents), especially those registering for the ACT using a fee waiver, to ensure that they have a plan that covers the time from registration to their completion of the ACT. Working with students to ensure that they have completed the necessary steps can help ensure that:

1. Students plan to test on dates when there are fewer competing events that will impact their ability to test on Saturday morning; educators can make sure that students consider Saturday (and Friday night) conflicts that may arise, or may even already be scheduled.
2. Students are reminded of the free test prep products available to them and have set a timeline for reviewing that will enable the students to feel ready to test. To take full advantage of the test prep available to them, students should register at least six weeks before their test date.
3. Students have requested and school staff have submitted the required forms for students who require accommodations.
4. Students understand the necessity of uploading a picture before the deadline and can receive help doing so, if necessary.
5. Students will have transportation to the test center on the test day. This may include arranging a ride with a peer who is also testing, looking up schedules for public transportation, or simply making sure the student has arranged a ride (and even a backup) with a family member or other driver. Many students stated that their transportation issues arose out of issues with communication: If students are encouraged to create a written plan well in advance, share with an educator, and get explicit agreement from their ride (and perhaps a back-up option as well), many of the common transportation issues would be mitigated.
6. Students review their testing date and location a few days before the test date, including putting the address (rather than the name) of the test center into a GPS to ensure that they have the correct location and have calculated how much time they will need to get there.
7. Students are prepared with a printed copy of their admission ticket and a valid photo ID on test day, and that they have fully read their admission ticket to ensure they understand all of the requirements and procedures for test day.
8. Students set their alarm to guarantee that they will have plenty of time to arrive at their test center after a good night's sleep.

What Has ACT Done so Far?

1. Our new test registration site, MyACT, makes the test prep options available—for free, to those students registering for the ACT using a fee waiver—far more visible at the time of ACT registration. Students registering with a fee waiver online (or via phone) will have The Official ACT® Self-Paced Course, Powered by Kaplan® automatically added to their order.
2. Printed admission tickets are no longer required to test. They are still highly recommended, as they contain essential information for testing students, but a student will not be prevented from testing if they do not have their ticket.
3. Starting in September 2020, eligible students receive four fee waivers (up from two) and can send unlimited score reports (up from 20).
4. Students registering for the ACT using a fee waiver now also have any late registration fees waived.

These are only the small steps ACT has already taken; our organization is using the lessons we've learned from this survey as we look for additional ways to improve attendance rates for all students, particularly those who register for the ACT using a fee waiver.

Conclusion

Students who register for the ACT using a fee waiver can face a variety of barriers to testing as scheduled. Some of these barriers are preventable and others are unavoidable, but state and local policymakers, principals, teachers, and school counselors, as well as ACT, can take concrete steps to help this particularly vulnerable population access a free college admissions test and show postsecondary institutions what they know. While there was no one predominate reasons for students' absence from the October 2019 National ACT test, the two most frequently reported reasons were that students needed to be somewhere else the day of the test or they did not have all of the materials they needed to be admitted to the test center.

Notes

1. Ty Cruce, Raeal Moore, and Shannon Hayes, *Use of Fee Waivers to Register for the ACT* (Iowa City, IA: ACT, 2020), <https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/R1826-fee-waiver-usage.pdf>.
2. Ty Cruce, Shannon Hayes, and Raeal Moore, *Test-Day Absenteeism among Students Who Register for the ACT with a Fee Waiver* (Iowa City, IA: ACT, 2020), <https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/R1829-fw-test-day-absenteeism.pdf>.
3. Ty Cruce, Shannon Hayes, and Raeal Moore, *Test History of Test-Day Absentees Who Registered for the ACT with a Fee Waiver* (Iowa City, IA: ACT, 2021), <https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/R1865-test-history-fee-waivers-2021-1.pdf>.

4. We administered the survey in batches, based on when testing status updates were provided from the testing site to ACT. Based on these data, we estimated the students who did not test as scheduled in order to send the survey in a timely manner. Our approach covered about 81% of the intended population (i.e., students who registered with a fee waiver and were absent from the test). That said, 6,041 students in our intended population were not sent an invitation to participate and another 9,632 students who registered for the ACT with a fee waiver who did not take the test were sent an invitation to participate. This report focuses only on the responses of students who did not take the October 2019 test.
5. Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, “Using the Data,” NCES, 2018, <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/use-the-data>. All data are from October 2019, before the Covid-19 pandemic impacted education and college admissions processes throughout the country, unless otherwise mentioned.
6. A comparison of open-ended responses and scaled responses indicates that there were students who had more than one reason. Analyses in this report, however, focus on the primary reason.
7. Some reasons did not lend themselves to actionable steps on the part of key stakeholders. For example, students who said taking the test was no longer necessary for them to achieve their goals, indicated, for the most part, that they received a prior ACT score that was high enough to get into their chosen college. Students who said that they were sick or injured, simply told us they were sick or provided a detailed account of how they injured themselves. These accounts did not afford us a place to provide actionable steps for future change.
8. Student responses have been lightly edited for readability.
9. These percentages include all students who chose this reason for not taking the ACT, not just those who reported realizing they didn’t have a way to get to the test center on the day of the test.
10. Other reasons for not taking the test were not actionable (i.e., personal reasons, the weather, that they arrived late to the test center without an explanation) and therefore are not presented in this paper.
11. Students’ use of this reason for failing to take the ACT did not differ by race, gender, expected educational level, or parents’ educational level.
12. At the time of the survey, in October 2019, this free access was to ACT Online Prep Live and ACT Rapid Review. In August 2020, ACT upgraded its test prep offerings and, as of that time, students registering for the ACT using a fee waiver have free access to the Official ACT Self-Paced Course, Powered by Kaplan.
13. Because of the small sample size, no analyses by demographic measures (e.g., gender, race, parents’ education, student’s expected educational level) were conducted.

14. This reason was closely aligned with “I had the incorrect test date or test location.” However, we kept students’ responses as they had originally selected in this case, even though students who chose “I had the incorrect test date or test location” provided similar responses. For example, a few students in the latter category gave reasons such as, “I was not aware of the test being given on a Saturday; I thought it was gonna be a weekday, I apologize.”
15. In the survey, students were asked, “Which of the following best describes how you registered for the October 26, 2019 ACT test date?” Students were asked to choose one of the following options: (a) I registered myself; (b) I registered with someone else’s help; (c) Someone else registered me; or (d) Other. Only two students said that someone else registered them, and one student said “Other.”
16. Because of the small sample size, no analyses by demographic measures (e.g., gender, race, parents’ educational level, student’s expected educational level) were conducted.
17. Joshua Hyman, “ACT for All: The Effect of Mandatory College Entrance Exams on Postsecondary Attainment and Choice,” *Education Finance and Policy* 12, no. 3 (Summer 2017): 281-311. https://doi.org/10.1162/EDFP_a_00206.
18. For registering as a regular test center, see <https://www.act.org/content/act/en/products-and-services/the-act-educator/act-test-center-request-form.html>. To register as an unlisted test center, see https://actinc.my.salesforce.com/sfc/p/300000000Wu5/a/4v0000005dNB/wHOZe7SKaNTn1bm1I53t_AeHdDC7z6sQRmX.uCAQuWU.
19. For upcoming ACT test dates, see <http://www.act.org/content/act/en/products-and-services/the-act/registration.html>.
20. For an example, see: ACT, “National School Breakfast Week: Making a Difference,” *ACT Leadership Blog*, 2019, <https://leadershipblog.act.org/2019/03/national-school-breakfast-week-making.html>.

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