



How ACT Assessments Align with State College and Career Readiness Standards

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Alignment and ESEA

In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the original Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), a major initiative of the “War on Poverty” that Johnson introduced during his 1964 State of the Union address. The act was intended to create opportunities and funding to ensure that all students, regardless of race or income, had access to the best possible educational opportunities.

ESEA is required to be reauthorized every five years to ensure that new and emerging educational research and priorities are addressed and included in the act. In 2001—the most recent reauthorization of ESEA—President George W. Bush reauthorized the act under the moniker No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Under NCLB, the federal government required states to adopt high-quality education standards and assessments aligned to those standards.

The term *alignment* has since taken on a variety of meanings among educators and policymakers, particularly with respect to curriculum, instruction, and professional development, all of which combine with standards and assessments to provide the basis for a pedagogically sound, seamless, and aligned system of teaching and

learning. In the context of NCLB's accountability provisions, however, *alignment* refers to the content alignment between the education standards a state has adopted (which teachers are charged with implementing in schools) and the annual assessments its students take so their progress toward meeting those standards can be measured and evaluated.

Alignment and the Federal Peer-Review Process

Since 2001, ESEA has required each state to submit to a federal peer-review process under which they must demonstrate to the US Department of Education that its standards and assessments are aligned. This process was temporarily suspended in December 2012 as states began rigorously revising or replacing their state standards and assessment systems to reflect the knowledge and skills students need to be prepared for college and career by the time they graduate from high school.

With federal administrators still discussing the future of the new peer-review system, alignment continues to concern states as they seek to develop or select assessment systems that align with their recently adopted college and career readiness standards. A majority of states have adopted the Common Core State Standards and will be using new assessments currently being created by one of two state consortia to assess progress toward those standards. Other states that have adopted the Common Core—as well as states that chose not to adopt those standards or reversed course on their previous adoptions—are seeking their own assessment systems or have chosen (or will choose) assessments created by one of a variety of testing companies.

During this period of fast-moving change, ACT has engaged with states interested in using the ACT® test and ACT Aspire® as part of their statewide assessment systems. These ACT solutions, based on the longstanding and empirically grounded ACT College and Career Readiness Standards, are explicitly designed and have been empirically validated to assess student progress toward college and career readiness, and therefore are a good match with many state college and career readiness standards.

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The Standards ACT Assessments Align With

One of the first questions state policymakers often ask is whether ACT assessments “align with the Common Core.” Some ask because they have adopted the Common Core and know that ACT contributed data and research to the development of those standards. Others ask because they wish not to be associated with the Common Core and by extension with any assessment that claims to align with those standards.

Since ACT Aspire was under development prior to the release of the Common Core State Standards, ACT Aspire was not designed to directly measure progress toward those standards. However, since ACT data, empirical research, and subject matter expertise about what constitutes college and career readiness was lent to the Common Core development effort, significant overlap exists between the Common Core State Standards and the college and career readiness constructs that ACT Aspire and the ACT measure.

To put this in the simplest terms: If a state's standards represent the knowledge and skills that prepare students for college and career, then ACT Aspire and the ACT measure that knowledge and those skills.

The Empirical Foundations of ACT Assessments

An important and unique benefit of using ACT assessments is that, unlike many assessments that rely solely on expert opinion, ACT assessments are designed using empirical research.

ACT relies on research to ensure that its assessments and the ACT College and Career Readiness Standards constitute sufficient and up-to-date preparation for postsecondary education and workforce training. The ACT National Curriculum Survey[®], conducted every three

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to four years since 1976, is the only survey of its kind in the United States. ACT first identifies what postsecondary faculty, including instructors of entry-level college and workforce-training courses, expect of their entering students—that is, the knowledge and skills students need to demonstrate to be ready for entry-level postsecondary courses and jobs. ACT then compares these expectations to what is really happening in elementary, middle, and high school classrooms. ACT uses the results of these comparisons to determine the skills and knowledge that should be measured on ACT assessments and to guide its test blueprints.

The ACT College and Career Readiness Standards were also developed using empirical research. The ACT College and Career Readiness Standards have two research-based components:

1. The standards describing what students should know and be able to do at various ACT score ranges are based on analysis of thousands of actual student responses across multiple test forms developed from the test blueprints.
2. The progression across ACT score ranges provides an empirical indicator of whether students are performing well enough in relation to those standards to be considered ready for postsecondary opportunities.

These components and longitudinal data extending into postsecondary education allow ACT to empirically validate the ACT College and Career Readiness Standards as describing requisite skills and performance levels for postsecondary readiness.

Finally, student performance on the assessments is anchored by empirically based ACT College Readiness Benchmark scores. The ACT College Readiness Benchmarks are the minimum scores required on each subject test on the ACT (English, mathematics, reading, and science) for students to have a high probability of success in credit-bearing, entry-level college courses in that subject area. ACT has set Benchmarks for the most commonly taken entry-level college courses (English Composition, College Algebra, introductory social science courses, and Biology) and for other courses (such as Calculus and Chemistry).

Students who meet a Benchmark on the ACT have approximately a 50 percent likelihood of earning a B or better, and approximately a 75 percent likelihood of earning a C or better, in the corresponding college course or course area, without remediation. The Benchmarks give students, families, and educators useful information for assessing whether a student has mastered the skills they need to succeed in postsecondary education.

Data about the actual performance of students in college serve as the empirical basis for the Benchmarks. ACT provides research services to colleges to help them place students in entry-level courses as accurately as possible and identify students needing additional support. Through these research services and other research partnerships, ACT has compiled an archive of course grade data from a wide range of postsecondary institutions in the United States. These data provide an overall measure of what it takes to be successful in selected first-year college courses. Data from 214 institutions and more than 230,000 students were used to establish the most recent iteration of the Benchmarks, which are weighted so they are representative of two- and four-year postsecondary institutions nationwide.

Moreover, for ACT Aspire, ACT has developed Benchmarks for grades 3–10 that indicate whether students are on target to become ready for college by the time they complete high school. The ACT Readiness Benchmarks for grades 3–10 and the ACT College Readiness Benchmarks provide students, families, and educators with validated, coherent indicators of readiness from grades 3 through high school graduation.

Conclusion

In ACT Aspire and the ACT, ACT has the only longitudinal college and career readiness assessments with scores linked to actual student performance in college courses and to descriptions of what students need to know and be able to do in college. No other organization can make this claim.

ACT assessments align not only to the expectations of postsecondary education—including recruitment, admission, and placement—but also to the college and career readiness expectations of states and their students. For these reasons, ACT assessments are an ideal way for states that have adopted college and career readiness standards to measure the progress of their students toward meeting those standards. ■



ACT Benchmarks help show whether students have mastered the skills they need to succeed in postsecondary education.

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