

## ACT Research and Policy

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## Information Brief

# What Are the ACT College Readiness Benchmarks?

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The ACT College Readiness Benchmarks are the minimum ACT® college readiness assessment scores required for students to have a high probability of success in credit-bearing college courses—English Composition, social sciences courses, College Algebra, or Biology. In addition to the benchmarks for the ACT, there are corresponding benchmarks for ACT Explore®, taken in eighth and/or ninth grades, and ACT Plan®, taken in tenth grade, to gauge student progress in becoming ready for college. And for students taking ACT Compass®, a computer-adaptive course placement assessment used by colleges, we have identified the College Readiness Benchmarks on the ACT Compass scale corresponding to success in credit-bearing community college courses.

### Why these courses?

English Composition, College Algebra, and Biology are the first credit-bearing courses most commonly taken by first-year college students. Course placement data also show that reading achievement is most closely aligned with success in credit-bearing social sciences courses in college.

### ACT College Readiness Benchmarks

College Course or Course Area	ACT Subject-Area Test	ACT Explore Benchmark Grade 8	ACT Explore Benchmark Grade 9	ACT Plan Benchmark	The ACT Test Benchmark	ACT Compass Benchmark*
English Composition	English	13	14	15	18	77
Social Sciences	Reading	16	17	18	22	89
College Algebra	Mathematics	17	18	19	22	52
Biology	Science	18	19	20	23	NA

\*The ACT Compass English Benchmark refers to the ACT Compass Writing Skills Test. The ACT Compass Mathematics Benchmark refers to the ACT Compass Algebra Test. ACT Compass does not contain a science test.

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### **What do we mean by “a high probability of success”?**

Students who meet a Benchmark on the ACT or ACT Compass have approximately a 50 percent chance of earning a B or better and approximately a 75 percent chance of earning a C or better in the corresponding college course or courses. Students who meet a Benchmark on ACT Explore or ACT Plan are likely to have approximately this same chance of earning such a grade in the corresponding college course(s) by the time they graduate high school.

### **What data were used to establish the Benchmarks for the ACT?**

The ACT College Readiness Benchmarks are empirically derived based on the actual performance of students in college. As part of its Course Placement Service, ACT provides research services to colleges to help them place students in entry-level courses as accurately as possible. In providing these research services, ACT has compiled an extensive database of course grade and test score data from a large number of first-year students and across a wide range of postsecondary institutions. These data provide an overall measure of what it takes to be successful in selected first-year college courses. Data from 214 institutions and over 230,000 students were used to establish the Benchmarks. The data were weighted so that they would be representative of two- and four-year postsecondary institutions nationwide. The ACT College Readiness Benchmarks were first established in 2005 and were updated in 2013 using data from more recent high school graduates.

### **How do the Benchmarks for the ACT differ from minimum college course placement scores?**

As described above, the Benchmarks represent a summary across many colleges and many students. The standards for each individual college may vary depending on the material covered in the course and the grading practices within that course. Therefore, the Benchmarks represent a criterion for success for a *typical* student at a *typical* college. As such, they give students, parents, and counselors useful guidelines to assess whether a student has mastered the necessary skills to have a reasonable chance of success in college.

ACT will work with any particular postsecondary institution or group of institutions within a state to conduct its own validation studies to establish local benchmarks that, in taking specific institutional and student characteristics into account, can be used as college course placement scores.

### **How were the Benchmarks determined for ACT Explore and ACT Plan?**

The College Readiness Benchmarks for ACT Explore and ACT Plan were developed using large data sets of students who had taken ACT Explore, ACT Plan, and the ACT. First, we estimated the probabilities at each ACT Explore and ACT Plan test score point associated with meeting the appropriate Benchmark for the ACT. We then identified the ACT Explore and ACT Plan test scores in English, Reading, Mathematics, and Science that corresponded most closely to a 50 percent probability of success at meeting each of the four Benchmarks established for the ACT.

### **How were the Benchmarks determined for ACT Compass?**

The College Readiness Benchmarks for ACT Compass are designed to be comparable to the College Readiness Benchmarks for the ACT. A 2010 ACT test/ACT Compass concordance study was used to establish these comparable values for ACT Compass. The concordance tables in this study are designed to give comparable scores between an ACT Compass subject test and the corresponding ACT subject test. For each of the ACT College Readiness Benchmarks, the comparable ACT Compass Benchmark was calculated using the corresponding table from the concordance study.

As with the Benchmarks for the ACT, ACT Compass Benchmarks might not serve as the appropriate course placement score at all colleges. Rather, the ACT Compass Benchmarks represent a criterion for success for a typical student at a typical college. ACT will work with any particular postsecondary institution or group of institutions within a state to conduct its own validation studies to establish local benchmarks that, in taking specific institutional and student characteristics into account, can be used as college course placement scores.

### **How can institutions benefit from using the Benchmarks?**

Colleges can use the Benchmarks for the ACT as one among several criteria for admission or as a foundation for determining course placement scores. Middle schools and high schools can use the Benchmarks for ACT Explore and ACT Plan as a means of evaluating students' early progress toward college readiness so that timely interventions can be made when necessary, or as an educational counseling or career planning tool.

Colleges (especially two-year institutions) can use the Benchmarks for ACT Compass to help in efficiently assigning walk-in students to the proper courses and to diagnose student remediation needs.

In all the above cases, the Benchmarks offer users a concise, reliable method of articulating postsecondary expectations to middle schools and high schools so that timely interventions can be made.