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*The recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), affirms the importance of holding all students to high academic standards and preparing all students for college and career, and grants states greater autonomy than in the past over how they ensure students' progress toward readiness.*

*While requiring accountability systems that include academic indicators, ESSA also recognizes that academic achievement represents only one dimension of success. In an earlier brief,<sup>1</sup> ACT presented data supporting one dimension of its holistic model of readiness for college and career<sup>2</sup>—behavioral skills. This brief presents the data to support another dimension of the framework: education and career navigation.*

- *College aspirations.* While 87 percent of the ACT-tested high school graduating class of 2014 aspired to attend some form of college after high school, only 69 percent of them actually enrolled in college the fall after high school graduation.<sup>5</sup>
- *Postsecondary major.* College students who change their majors multiple times spend more time in college earning their degrees and incur more financial debt.<sup>6</sup>
- *College completion.* Only 55 percent of first-time undergraduates who enrolled directly in college (two-year, four-year, public, or private) in fall 2008 finished a degree within six years.<sup>7</sup>
- *Job and career choices.* On average, individuals born between 1957 and 1964 held 11.7 jobs from age 18 to age 48. Half of these job changes occurred between the ages of 18 and 24.<sup>8</sup>

Some individuals may find a counselor, teacher, or other mentor to help guide them along their paths, while others end up satisfied and successful in the schools and jobs they choose on their own. Unfortunately, others may not.

Many individuals who struggle with education and career choices might be surprised to know that there are specific things they can do that can better prepare them to set personally relevant, informed goals and develop strategies to achieve them. These include understanding one's interests, values, and skills; knowing the world of education and work; engaging in exploration, informed decision-making, and planning; and managing educational and occupational progress over time.<sup>9</sup>

Research by ACT and others has demonstrated that education and career navigation contributes to a variety of positive results. This brief summarizes those findings.

Education and career navigation consists of the personal characteristics, processes, and knowledge that influence individuals as they journey along their education and career paths. Through extensive research on the topic, ACT has divided into four domains the kinds of education and career navigation that are most directly related to student success:

1. **Self-Knowledge.** Perceptions of one's own abilities, interests, skills, values, attitudes, beliefs, etc. that contribute to understanding the self.
2. **Environmental Factors.** Information, conditions, and experiences related to education and work that are acquired primarily from external sources and surroundings.
3. **Integration.** The ongoing process of combining self-knowledge and environmental factors to form personally relevant knowledge structures used to evaluate information and to plan courses of action pertaining to education and work.
4. **Managing Career and Education Actions.** The ongoing process of implementing plans and enacting purposive behaviors that facilitate education and occupation progress.

Studies show that individuals who develop education and career navigation knowledge and skills are likely to:

- Have expanded education and career opportunities<sup>10</sup>
- Make education and career decisions that better fit them<sup>11</sup>
- Increase their motivation to learn and achieve<sup>12</sup>
- Experience more positive outcomes in both school and work settings<sup>13</sup>

Navigation plays different roles and yields differing benefits at various stages along the kindergarten-through-career continuum. Students' ideas about their academic abilities and about potential career aspirations form early, gradually becoming more tailored to students' developing personal characteristics, and

are thought to play key gatekeeper roles at critical developmental milestones.<sup>14</sup> For example, engaging in exploratory actions is a precondition to identifying one's career direction, and limited exploration can delay or impede making informed choices about high school, college, or work.

During the **middle school** years, making plans based on one's ideas about potential future careers has been shown to encourage postsecondary planning<sup>15</sup> and to later influence individuals' career aspirations<sup>16</sup> and career engagement.<sup>17</sup> More immediately, developing a sense of one's interests can influence the courses one takes, which in turn may guide later decisions and plans. For example, middle school students who are interested in mathematics are likely to pursue—and experience—high achievement in mathematics-related activities.<sup>18</sup>





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