



**Building a Common Language for Career Readiness and Success:  
*A Foundational Competency Framework for Employers and Educators***

**A Holistic Approach to Career Success: Moving Beyond Traditional Measures of College and Career Readiness**

Efforts to better align the transition between secondary and postsecondary education have gained momentum in recent years with a universal goal of preparing students to be both college and career ready. U.S. Department of Education Secretary Arne Duncan stated, “It is the responsibility of K-12 educators to prepare all students for both college and a career.”<sup>1</sup> At the same time, workforce development stakeholders are focused on ensuring that secondary and postsecondary education are aligned with job skill requirements that reflect trends in the global economy. This effort is backed by various national initiatives, such as the President’s Council on Jobs and Competitiveness, to ensure that students will graduate with the knowledge, skills, and industry-relevant education needed to get on a pathway to a successful career.<sup>2</sup>

Among education and workforce development circles, much has been discussed about how to ensure that individuals are “college”, “career” and “work” ready in order to prepare them for career success. As a result, there is a great deal of confusion in the education and workforce market about what these terms really mean in terms of readiness. ACT released a research report introducing a broader definition of college and career readiness that moves beyond traditional indicators of core academic skills such as high school grade point average, class rank, scores on college readiness assessments and classroom rigor to also include noncognitive skills and workplace competencies that are not addressed in traditional academic settings.<sup>3</sup> Framed by this expanded view of college and career readiness, the next step is to examine the inclusion of foundational workplace competencies, both cognitive and noncognitive, that are important above and beyond just core academic skills as potential additional measures of career success.

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## **Unique Contributions of College, Career, and Work Readiness for Success**

This paper reviews ACT's current definition of "college readiness", and presents workable, policy-relevant definitions of "career readiness" and "work readiness" with respect to how they

and as such represent a typical set of expectations. The combination of both college readiness



**Work readiness** is defined as the level of “foundational skills” an individual needs to be minimally qualified for a specific occupation/job as determined through an occupational profile or job analysis.

Similar to **Foundational skills** for career readiness, work readiness include both workplace cognitive and non-cognitive skills. The difference is that foundational skills needed for career readiness are portable across all occupations (e.g., reading for information, applied mathematics, problem solving, and critical thinking). The foundational skills needed for work readiness are occupation-specific, *vary both in importance and level for different occupations*, may include more and different skills than just the foundational cognitive skills, and depend on the critical tasks identified via occupational or job profiles. Furthermore, an individual must achieve a level of career readiness needed for a career path before they can be considered ready to work in a specific occupation.

Occupational profiles are descriptions of the key skill areas and levels of skills required to enter an occupation and successfully perform tasks. Occupational profiles are usually developed via job analysis, or the process of identifying in detail the particular job duties and requirements and the relative importance of these duties for a given job.<sup>11</sup> One source of occupational profiles is the Occupational Information Network (O\*NET) which identifies and describes the key knowledge, skills, and abilities for over 1,100 occupations.<sup>12</sup> ACT also publishes occupational profiles based on the WorkKeys® system which contain the combination and level of skills needed to be successful in target occupations.<sup>13</sup> The occupational profiles were developed by combining information from the job profiles for groups of jobs that share the same identification numbers in the O\*NET database.

Much like college readiness, the level of achievement needed for work success can be determined via a combination of work readiness standards and benchmarks.<sup>14</sup> Work readiness standards, as determined by the level of foundational skills profiled for a nationally representative sample of jobs in a given occupation, could serve as precise descriptions of the essential skills and knowledge that individuals need to become ready for an occupation. Likewise, work readiness benchmarks should be defined by scores on work readiness







become even more specific to a target major linked to a specific occupation. This model provides the basis for identifying academic and workplace competencies needed to acquire stackable credentials that will support an individual's career progression.

*setting.*”<sup>16</sup> Competency is not to be confused with “competence” which describes a level of performance. For example, competencies often serve as the basis for skill standards that specify the *level* of knowledge, skills, and abilities required for success in the workplace, as well as

Competency models can take a variety of forms and typically include the following elements:

***Competency names and detailed definitions.*** For example, a competency model could



The pyramid-shaped graphic below depicts how competencies become more specific as you move up the tiers. The tiers are divided into blocks representing skills, knowledge and abilities

portable across many occupations and are important for career success.<sup>22</sup> An example of a national layered credentialing system is the Manufacturing Skills Certification System, endorsed by the National Association of Manufacturers. This system of using industry-recognized credentials to certify competencies and skills begins with the ACT National Career Readiness Certificate at the foundation, followed by increasingly targeted occupation and job-specific skills credentials.<sup>23</sup>

### **Measuring Foundational Academic and Workplace Competencies Important for Work and Career Success**

There are common indicators between college and workplace success. For example, research has shown that cognitive ability is the strongest predictor for both job performance and academic success.<sup>24</sup> In addition, certain personality traits such as conscientiousness and emotional stability, as well as motivational factors such as goal setting, also predict both college and work outcomes. While there are some commonalities among academic and workplace success indicators, there are differences in how these indicators are measured. A report by the National Assessment Governing Board found that measuring reading and math for academic settings does not equate to measuring reading and math for applied workplace settings. While some overlap was found, the results of the study did not support using only academic assessments to measure career readiness.<sup>25</sup> These findings produce further support for incorporating both foundational academic and workplace competencies into secondary and post-secondary education programs so that the targets of instruction are aligned with general job skill requirements. In summary, research shows that

## Endnotes

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*Pathways to Prosperity*

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*College Readiness Standards for EXPLORE, PLAN, and the ACT*  
*College Readiness System: Meeting the Challenge of a Changing World*