



What Are ACT's College Readiness Benchmarks?

ACT's College Readiness Benchmarks are the minimum ACT test scores required for students to have a high probability of success in credit-bearing college courses—English Composition, social sciences courses, Algebra, or Biology. In addition to the Benchmarks for the ACT, there are corresponding EXPLORE[®] and PLAN[®] Benchmarks for use by students who take these programs to gauge their progress in becoming college ready in the eighth and tenth grades, respectively. And for students taking COMPASS[®], a computer-adaptive course placement assessment used by colleges, we have identified the College Readiness Benchmarks on the COMPASS scale corresponding to success in credit-bearing community college courses.

ACT's College Readiness Benchmarks

College Course or Course Area	Test	EXPLORE Score	PLAN Score	ACT Score	COMPASS Score
English Composition	English	13	15	18	69
Social Sciences	Reading	15	17	21	88
Algebra	Mathematics	17	19	22	65
Biology	Science*	20	21	24	n/a*

Why these courses?

English Composition, 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.

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

Students who meet a Benchmark on the ACT or 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 EXPLORE or 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?

ACT's 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 an extensive database consisting 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 98 institutions and over 90,000 students were used to establish the Benchmarks.

For each course, all colleges that supplied data for that course were included. If a college sent data from more than a single year, only data from the most recent year were included. The numbers and types of college varied by course.

Because the sample of colleges in this study is a "convenience" sample (that is, based on data from colleges that chose to participate in ACT's Course Placement Service), there is no guarantee that it is representative of all colleges in the U.S. Therefore, we weighted the sample so that it would be representative of the variety of schools in terms of their selectivity.

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

As noted 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. 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 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 placement scores.

How were the Benchmarks determined for EXPLORE and PLAN?

The College Readiness Benchmarks for EXPLORE and PLAN were developed using about 150,000 records of students who had taken EXPLORE, PLAN, and the ACT. First, we estimated the probabilities at each EXPLORE and PLAN test score point associated with meeting the appropriate Benchmark for the ACT. We then identified the EXPLORE and 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 COMPASS?

The College Readiness Benchmarks for COMPASS were developed using the same procedures followed in determining the Benchmarks for the ACT, but with COMPASS data substituted for ACT data.

As with the Benchmarks for the ACT, COMPASS Benchmarks might not serve as the appropriate course placement score at all colleges. Rather, the 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 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. States can use the Benchmarks as a tool for establishing minimum standards for high school graduation in statewide assessment contexts that are aimed at preparing high school graduates for postsecondary education.

Junior high and high schools can use the Benchmarks for EXPLORE and 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 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 and high schools so that timely interventions can be made.