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Education and Career Navigation: Critical for Student Progress and Success*

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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,[1] *ACT presented data supporting one dimension of its holistic model of readiness for college and career*[2]*—behavioral skills. This brief presents the data to support another dimension of the framework: education and career navigation.*

Introduction

Education and career paths, by their nature, present students and workers with numerous and sometimes difficult choices: What courses should I take during high school? What should my postsecondary major be? How long will it take me to finish college? What kind of job do I want? Should I stay in my current job or occupation? Should I train for a new one?

Facing these choices, individuals can struggle to set or navigate a path. Of ACT-tested high school graduates in the class of 2016 who responded to a question about whether they need help with education or occupation plans, 77 percent reported needing help.[3] Plenty of evidence exists attesting to their struggles, in high school and beyond, and the resulting effects. For example:

- *High school course-taking.* Only 60 percent of the most recent cohort of ACT-tested high school graduates reported having taken at least a core curriculum, suggesting that not enough students are adequately preparing for postsecondary opportunities.[4]

* For more detailed information on this topic, see Becky Bobek and Ran Zhao, "Education and Career Navigation," in *Beyond Academics: A Holistic Framework for Enhancing Education and Workplace Success,* ed. Wayne Camara, Ryan O'Connor, Krista Mattern, and Mary Ann Hanson (Iowa City, IA: ACT, 2015), 39–51. The author thanks Becky Bobek, principal research scientist in Behavior and Navigation Research at ACT, for invaluable assistance.

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- *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.[5]
- *Postsecondary major.* College students who change their majors multiple times spend more time in college earning their degrees and incur more financial debt.[6]
- *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.[7]
- *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.[8]

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.[9]

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

What Is Education and Career Navigation?

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.

What Has Research Found about Education and Career Navigation?

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

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

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.[14] 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[15] and to later influence individuals' career aspirations[16] and career engagement.[17] 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.[18]

Studies of navigation conducted among **high school** students have shown that:

- Those who seek out information about colleges are more likely to enroll in college.[19]
- Those who are intentional about planning for college (e.g., finding help with the college application or writing the college essay) are more likely to follow through with the application process required for college admission.[20]
- Those who have career goals are more likely to engage in meaningful planning related to those goals.[21]
- Those who perceive themselves as efficacious in their decision-making ability are more engaged in career exploration and planning activities during high school.[22]
- Those who have an interest in specific occupations tend to have higher expectations for themselves and more positive work-related attitudes.[23]

When students get to **college**, the research shows that navigation continues to have benefits. Among the findings:

- Students' academic goals predict grade point average (GPA) and retention in college.[24]
- Students who choose majors that are a good fit based on their interests have higher GPAs,[25] are less likely to change their majors,[26] and are more likely to persist in college and complete their degrees in a timely manner.[27]
- Students who want to develop or improve their skills and abilities are more likely to explore career options during college.[28]
- College students who perceive themselves as efficacious in their decision-making ability are more likely to show less indecision about a career and greater commitment to their career choices.[29]
- Graduating college students who engage in preparatory job-search behaviors (e.g., finding job information, identifying job leads) are more likely to obtain employment within four months of graduation.[30]

Finally, navigation continues to be relevant during the job-search process, as well as in the **workplace** itself:

- Individuals who have knowledge of and engage in effective job search behaviors obtain more job interviews and receive more job offers leading directly to employment.[31]
- Individuals who enter jobs that better fit them have both higher job performance and greater job satisfaction. Fit with one's job, in terms of the characteristics of the person and those of the job or the tasks performed in the job, relates to increased work commitment, higher performance on the job, and greater job satisfaction.[32]
- Fit with one's organization is also associated with greater commitment, performance, and satisfaction and is also related to positive coworker relationships and decreased stress.[33]
- Workers who are interested in their job tasks tend to have greater job knowledge,[34] effort,[35] and performance.[36]
- Workers' confidence about their ability to perform work tasks effectively has a positive influence on salary and tenure.[37]

These and similar findings serve as the evidentiary foundation for ACT's inclusion of education and career navigation in its holistic model of readiness for college and career.

Recommendations

As mentioned, many students report needing help with education or occupation plans, and evidence exists that individuals struggle at times along their education or career path. To assist educators and policymakers in improving students' facility with education and career navigation and in determining how best to evaluate navigation initiatives, ACT recommends the following:

- **Schools and district administrators should support education and career navigation.** They can do so by, for example, offering a series of courses on college and career planning; ensuring that all students have the navigation resources they need at the times they need them; building relationships with the community and local businesses to establish or expand work-based learning experiences for students; and determining ways in which existing data already collected on students can be used to inform or enhance their navigation efforts.
- **Educators should help students develop and strengthen their ability to navigate.** For example, they can provide ongoing opportunities to learn about interests, values, and other aspects of the self; make connections among academic coursework, college, and future career options; incorporate important navigation elements into individualized learning plans; and help parents keep the importance of education and career navigation in mind throughout their children's educational journeys.

- **Policymakers should advance navigation through legislation.** Whether at the federal or state level, such legislation could, for example, request and fund more research on how to influence navigation constructs; establish pilot programs for developing ways to monitor and evaluate navigation progress and growth; and encourage greater coordination across K–12, postsecondary, and workforce to develop education and career paths that support the success of all students.

Conclusion

This brief has illustrated the challenges that individuals face as they navigate their education and career paths and the wide range of positive education and work outcomes that result from successful navigation. Navigation is essential to a comprehensive, developmental, and lifelong approach to negotiating one's education and career journey. Students, job seekers, and workers can each benefit, differently at different stages in their lives, from acquiring and using knowledge about themselves and their education or work environments to purposefully make better-informed choices, actively make plans, and succeed at achieving their education or career goals. ■

Notes

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2. ACT's holistic model of readiness for college and career encompasses four areas. For detailed discussions of the model and ACT's rationale in developing it, see Krista Mattern, Jeremy Burrus, Wayne Camara, Ryan O'Connor, Mary Ann Hanson, James Gambrell, Alex Casillas, and Becky Bobek, *Broadening the Definition of College and Career Readiness: A Holistic Approach* (Iowa City, IA: ACT, 2014), and Camara et al., ed., *Beyond Academics*.
3. Data from students registering to take the ACT test who reported planning to graduate from high school in 2016.
4. ACT, *The ACT Profile Report—National: Graduating Class 2016 National* (Iowa City, IA: ACT, 2016).
5. ACT, *The Condition of College & Career Readiness 2015* (2015), http://www.act.org/content/act/en/research/condition-of-college-and-career-readiness-report-2015.html?page=0&chapter=8.
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