



Building a College-Going Culture by Increasing Access to the ACT

INTRODUCTION

Currently in Arizona, 36 percent of working-age adults have an associate's degree or higher. However, by 2020, more than 65 percent of jobs will require some form of postsecondary education. As a gateway to intellectual growth and diverse careers, postsecondary education, including certificates, licenses and college degrees, opens the door to opportunities.

A postsecondary education also provides students with the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in today's globally competitive economy.

Preparing every student in Arizona and Florida to succeed in postsecondary education is a collaborative task that is tied not only to improving and connecting education systems, but also to the long-term economic prosperity of our communities. In many ways, the future viability of our state's economy depends on the successful education of today's students.

As a foundation focused on creating opportunities for individuals in Arizona and Florida to succeed in postsecondary education, Helios Education Foundation strategically invests its knowledge, expertise and resources across the education continuum to advance student academic preparedness and to foster college-going cultures within the two states we serve.

Through a decade of strategic investment, Helios is working to build and sustain effective education systems that ultimately improve academic performance and increase access to postsecondary opportunities. As part of this work, the Foundation is actively engaging stakeholders from across the community in the academic success of all students.



According to the Phoenix Union High School District, in 2008, only 150 students self-selected to take the ACT exam. By 2013, year five of the ACT District Choice State Testing Program, more than 4,500 students took the exam.

Helios' investment in the Arizona ACT District Choice State Testing (ACT DCST) Program is part of the Foundation's broader effort to ensure more high school graduates are prepared to enter the workforce or take credit-bearing courses without remediation.

THE PROBLEM

According to a recent longitudinal study from the Arizona Board of Regents, 43.5 percent of students who graduated from public high schools in 2005–2006 had not pursued any postsecondary education within six years of graduating.¹ The reasons that students do not pursue postsecondary education vary, but they often center around a weak college-going culture, including inadequate academic preparation, a lack of understanding of the enrollment process and a general unawareness of the economic benefit of college attendance.² These students, often called “noncollege-bound students”, are less likely to take the practical steps needed for college admission and enrollment and, thus, are potentially closing the door on future college and career opportunities.



Increasing access to the ACT fosters college-going conversations with more students and provides valuable data to education leaders, school officials, parents and students on the academic preparedness of students to pursue postsecondary education.

Another challenge is the lack of academic performance data about the college and career readiness of Arizona students. From 1999 to 2014, Arizona required all of its high school students to take and pass Arizona’s Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS) test to graduate from high school.³

However, AIMS assessed a minimum level of basic skills and provided limited insights into a student’s postsecondary preparedness. Meanwhile, only select students who were already on a college-bound track traditionally took exams, such as the ACT and Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), that assess the skills needed to succeed in college and serve an important function in the college admission process. The results from this small group of students presented a distorted snapshot of the overall college readiness of Arizona high school graduates. Thus, it was difficult for teachers, students, families and state leaders to know where the vast majority of high school students fell in being prepared for college and career.

¹azregents.asu.edu/Documents/AZ-HS-Class-of-2005-06-Postsecondary-Outcomes-After-Six-Years-11-5-13.pdf

²<http://www.act.org/research/policymakers/pdf/NoncollegeboundStudents.pdf>

³Beginning in Spring 2015, Arizona will be administering a new state testing system called Arizona’s Measurement of Education Readiness to Inform Teaching (AZ MERIT)

THE INITIATIVE

In 2009, Helios Education Foundation began funding the administration of the ACT exam to all juniors in eight Arizona school districts. The ACT was chosen because it is a curriculum-based measure of college readiness, defined as the level of achievement a student needs to enroll and succeed in first-year college courses.

AT A GLANCE

14

districts currently participating

81K+

students took the ACT (2008–2013)



2% of Arizona students self-selected to take the ACT in 2008 (before ACT DCST Program began)



20% of Arizona students took the ACT in 2013 after six years of implementation

The Arizona ACT DCST Program initially was intended to address two intertwined challenges:

- Limited information was available from the AIMS tests regarding high school students’ readiness for college; and
- Arizona historically has had a low rate of students who are prepared for and pursue postsecondary opportunities.

The premise: By using students’ individual scores and aggregate school- and district-level data and administering the ACT to every student within the participating districts, both the districts and students will be empowered to take action toward increasing college readiness and matriculation. Ultimately, this may lead to district-wide changes to policies and practices in support of college readiness and postsecondary enrollment.

For individual students and their families, the test results may also identify an aptitude for postsecondary work that otherwise would go unnoticed. Or, the results may serve as an impetus for students who have not yet achieved college readiness to use their senior year to gain the skills they need. Additionally, simply taking a college admissions test may encourage students who otherwise would be unlikely to consider college to rethink their post-high school options.

From 2009–2013, Helios invested \$2.3 million to help school districts underwrite the costs of testing their juniors. Participation grew from eight districts in 2009 to 14 districts in 2013. A cost-sharing approach is determined with each district based on other available resources, including funding from the school districts and the state. More than 81,000 students have taken the exam as part of this initiative through 2014.

EARLY LESSONS

In the first years, the Arizona ACT DCST Program radically increased access to the exam. District-wide testing, without any cost to students, increased access to the ACT, especially for students who are minority, male and/or from lower-income families.

As a result, school administrators gained a more complete snapshot of the college-readiness of all students, across economic, gender and ethnic lines, rather than that of a smaller, self-selected, college-going population.

Equipped with a more comprehensive picture, school administrators could begin to assess their effectiveness in creating college-ready students, advocate for system-level reforms and bolster a college-going culture.

From the beginning, anecdotes filtered back to the Foundation about the impact of the Arizona ACT DCST Program. Three years into the program, Helios conducted interviews with educators in seven school districts that had participated in the initiative. While those interviews did not provide a scientific evaluation of the program, they provided important anecdotal evidence and early lessons for the Foundation.

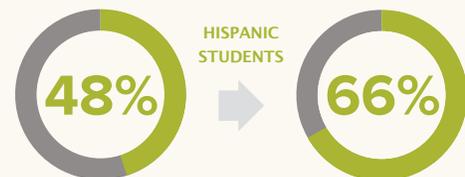
PARTICIPATION

The Arizona ACT DCST Program increased access to the test for all demographic groups. However, participation increased most notably for male, students of color and students from low-income families.

For example, in one large, urban school district, the following increases were documented:



Male students who took the ACT jumped from 35% of the junior test-takers in the year prior to the initiative to 46% of the junior test-takers in the first year of the initiative.



Students who were identified as Hispanic went from 48% of the junior test-takers in the year prior to the initiative to 66% of the junior test-takers in the first year of the initiative.



Students who self-reported a family income of \$36,000 or less went from 39% of the junior test-takers in the year prior to the initiative to 52% of the junior test-takers in the first year of the initiative.

Specifically, Helios learned that the Arizona ACT DCST Program continues to:

- **Reveal Collective Performance** — ACT data not only revealed student performance, it revealed the educators' collective performance.

One interviewee commented, "Until we have that data back from a place such as ACT, we don't have any way to confirm or deny that what we're doing is working. It's an objective look at the effectiveness of our programming."

According to another interviewee, having district-wide ACT data allowed them to ratchet up conversations with a local higher education institution about how many of their graduates were in remedial courses. Based on the data, the district determined more graduates were enrolled in English remediation than they had previously thought. In response, the district "targeted" their English courses by bringing in freshman English instructors from the college to collaborate with the district's instructional staff, improving alignment between K-12 and higher education.

- **Inform Curriculum and Course Sequencing** — The ACT test results provided educators with an important measure of student performance, highlighting areas of success and need, as well as helping administrators see where curriculum changes would be beneficial. Results from the ACT administration encouraged two districts to change their curriculum or course sequence. One district eliminated earth science for incoming freshman, replacing it with freshman-level physics, requiring algebra and physics instructors to work collaboratively and allowing students to experience how math could be applied directly to other topics.
- **Motivate Earlier Assessment** — Since launching the Arizona ACT DCST Program, many districts have also added the EXPLORE exam, which helps 8th and 9th graders plan for their high school coursework and their post-high school choices. Several educators said that the experience of administering the ACT made it easier to add the EXPLORE exam. There are also reported benefits to correlating the results of the two tests to assess the district's performance.
- **Inspire a College-Going Culture** — Almost unequivocally, district leaders reported that participating in the Arizona ACT DCST Program aligned well with ongoing efforts to create a college-going culture, and, in at least two cases, they credited it with kick-starting an important shift.

One interviewee noted, "It really unlocks a lot of potential that kids maybe didn't know they had. We found a lot of parents are taking a look at how well [their student] did on the ACT and [saying] well, wait a minute. Maybe [he/she] does have a chance to go to college."

"All kids need, whether they're going to a two-year or four-year school or some level of training, they're going to need to be ready and perform well. We've ramped up that culture," said another.

Another interviewee stated that the initiative did drive change in the conversation around which students were, and should be, college-bound. Beyond the impact on the individual student, educators noted that the expanded ACT testing helped them reshape the broader culture within their district.

"[The ACT] helps us have those conversations . . . really more detailed conversations of postsecondary planning," said one interviewee.

"What we're trying to do here is really engage in a system-wide cultural transformation from being a district solely [focused] on high school graduation to a district whose goal is college and career preparedness."

BUILDING ON LESSONS LEARNED

Helios Education Foundation has invested in the Arizona ACT DCST Program for a total of six years. In that time, a significant body of data has accumulated around student performance. These early learnings have also inspired the desire for more in-depth analysis of the available academic performance data and postsecondary-going behaviors of students within the participating districts. The project will be funded for a seventh year to continue testing juniors in the 14 districts. This will allow districts to have consistent data about the academic progress of their students during Arizona's transition to the new standardized assessments, AZ MERIT.

As a result of the early learnings, in late 2013, the Foundation launched a formal evaluation of the project to provide a more substantive assessment. The goal of that research is to assess the college and career readiness of Arizona students and to further understand whether this work is having an impact on student's pursuing postsecondary education opportunities. Results of that study are expected in late 2014 and will be shared in a follow-up Helios brief.