

What Kind of Test Preparation Is Best?

Introduction

The ACT is an achievement test—it indicates what a student is ready to learn next by measuring what they currently know and can do. Given the content and philosophy of the ACT, the approach that is most likely to increase ACT scores is high school coursework, because much of the knowledge and skills that are taught in high school is being measured on the ACT. The ACT was designed to reflect high school course taking, and as such it is a good measure of overall high school preparation by subject area and of student readiness for college or work after high school.

It would stand to reason that long-term learning in school, rather than cramming and coaching, would be the obvious best form of test preparation for the ACT. Earning high scores on the ACT is not simply a matter of innate ability or short-term preparation, but reflects a level of achievement resulting from planning, hard work, and dedication. To test this assumption, we can compare the score increases achieved by students who participated in various short-term test preparation activities to those associated with the longer-term preparation that students receive in planning for and taking college preparatory courses in high school.

Effects of Short-Term Test Preparation

Several studies conducted between the early 1990s and 2003 examined ACT score increases attributable solely to short-term test preparation activities using repeat test-takers and cross-sectional samples of students who took the test at given time points. The typical student reported spending fewer than 10 hours preparing for the ACT. The greatest short-term benefits were associated with participation in commercial test preparation courses and test preparation workshops offered by local schools and with use of test preparation computer software. The next highest benefits of short-term preparation were those gained from use of selected commercial workbooks. (Other research shows that the effects of activities such as commercial test preparation classes and test preparation tutoring on ACT subject test scores were even smaller: score increases associated with these activities did not exceed one point for ACT English, Mathematics, or Reading [Briggs, 2001].)

Effects of Longer-Term Test Preparation

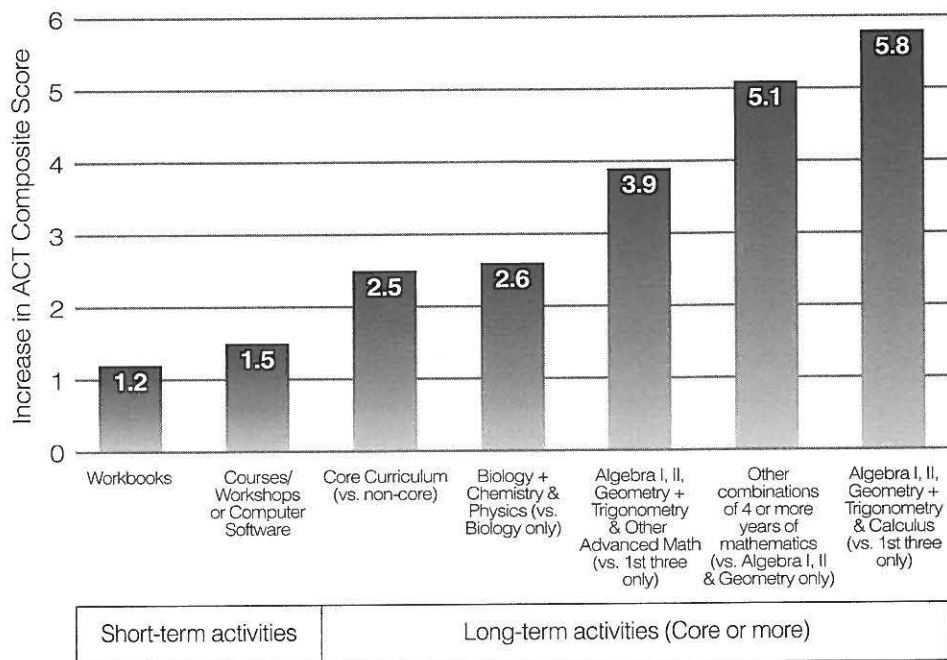
ACT research has continually demonstrated the benefits of taking longer-term, college preparatory coursework for increasing ACT scores, *regardless of students' prior achievement in high school*. As long as students enter these courses ready to learn, all of them can benefit.

Increases in the ACT Composite score associated with high school coursework are substantially larger than those associated with these short-term test preparation activities, regardless of the type of activity.

For example, taking the recommended core college-preparatory curriculum (4 years of English, 3 years each of mathematics, science, and social studies) was associated with ACT Composite scores of 2004 high school graduates that were greater than those of students not taking the core (ACT, Inc., 2004)—score gains nearly twice the amount of the increases associated with short-term preparation.

Within each subject area, 2004 high school graduates who reported taking or planning to take certain higher-level courses achieved even greater increases in average ACT Composite score than those who did not. The largest increases were those associated with additional mathematics coursework over and above the recommended core curriculum.

The results of these studies are summarized in the figure below. Score increases associated with the various activities are arranged in ascending order from left to right. Given that scores on the ACT are reported on a scale from 1 to 36, the degree of impact of these increases on ACT Composite score also increases substantially from left to right.



Conclusion

Individual short-term test preparation activities appear to have a relatively small positive impact on ACT Composite score when compared to long-term activities best exemplified by high school course-taking.

Simply taking the right core courses in high school can increase ACT Composite score more than does any one of the most beneficial short-term test preparation activities. What's more, taking specific courses over and above the recommended core curriculum can increase ACT Composite score by up to 5.8 score points, depending on the course taken. Thus, we see that the courses students take in high school matter much more than short-term test preparation activities.