

STANDARDS FOR QUALIFICATIONS OF TEST USERS

American Counseling Association

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The professional qualifications essential to the use of tests in counseling arise from a synthesis of knowledge, skills, and ethics. While some professional groups are seeking to control and restrict the use of psychological tests*, the American Counseling Association believes firmly that one's right to use tests in counseling practice is directly related to competence. This competence is achieved through education, training, and experience in the field of testing. Thus, professional counselors with a master's degree or higher and appropriate coursework in appraisal/assessment, supervision, and experience are qualified to use objective tests. With additional training and experience, professional counselors are also able to administer projective tests, individual intelligence tests, and clinical diagnostic tests. This training may occur in graduate school, in post-graduate professional development instruction, or in supervised training in use of the test. Professional counselors are qualified to use tests and assessments in counseling practice to the degree that they possess the appropriate knowledge and skills, including the following areas:

1. Skill in practice and knowledge of theory relevant to the testing context and type of counseling specialty.

Assessment and testing must be integrated into the context of the theory and knowledge of a specialty area, not as a separate act, role, or entity. In addition, professional counselors should be skilled in treatment practice with the population being served.

2. A thorough understanding of testing theory, techniques of test construction, and test reliability and validity.

Included in this knowledge base are methods of item selection, theories of human nature that underlie a given test, reliability, and validity. Knowledge of reliability includes, at a minimum: methods by which it is determined, such as domain sampling, test-retest, parallel forms, split-half, and inter-item consistency, the strengths and limitations of each of these methods; the standard error of measurement, which indicates how accurately a person's test score reflects their true score of the trait being measured; and true score

*For the purpose of this document, terms such as inventory, instrument, measure and scale are encompassed by the terms test or assessment.

theory, which defines a test score as an *estimate* of what is true. Knowledge of validity includes, at a minimum: types of validity, including content, criterion-related (both predictive and concurrent), and construct methods of assessing each type of validity, including the use of correlation; and the meaning and significance of standard error of estimate.

3. A working knowledge of sampling techniques, norms, and descriptive, correlational and predictive statistics.

Important topics in sampling include sample size, sampling techniques, and the relationship between sampling and test accuracy. A working knowledge of descriptive statistics includes, at a minimum: probability theory, measures of central tendency; multi-modal and skewed distributions, measures of variability, including variance and standard deviation; and standard scores, including deviation IQ's, z-scores, T-scores, percentile ranks, stanines/stens, normal curve equivalents, grade- and age-equivalents. Knowledge of correlation and prediction includes, at a minimum: the principle of least squares; the direction and magnitude of relationship between two sets of scores; deriving a regression equation; the relationship between regression and correlation; and the most common procedures and formulas used to calculate correlations.

4. Ability to review, select, and administer tests appropriate for clients or students and the context of the counseling practice.

Professional counselors using tests should be able to describe the purpose and use of different types of tests, including the most widely used tests for their setting and purposes. Professional counselors use their understanding of sampling, norms, test construction, validity and reliability to accurately assess the strengths, limitations, and appropriate applications of a test for the clients being served. Professional counselors using tests also should be aware of the potential for error when relying on computer printouts of test interpretation. For accuracy of interpretation, technological resources must be augmented by a counselor's firsthand knowledge of the client and the test-taking context.

5. Skill in administration of tests and interpretation of test scores.

Competent test users implement appropriate and standardized administration procedures. This requirement enables professional counselors to provide consultation and training to others who assist with test administration and scoring. In addition to standardized procedures, test users provide testing environments that are comfortable and free of distraction. Skilled interpretation requires a strong working knowledge of the theory underlying the test, test's purpose, statistical meaning of test scores, and norms used in test construction. Skilled interpretation also requires an understanding of the similarities and differences between the client or student and the norm samples used in test construction. Finally, it is essential that clear and accurate communication of test score meaning in oral or written form to clients, students or appropriate others be provided.

6. Knowledge of the impact of diversity on testing accuracy, including age, gender, ethnicity, race, disability, and linguistic differences.

Professional counselors using tests should be committed to fairness in every aspect of testing. Information gained and decisions made about the client or student are valid only to the degree that the test accurately and fairly assesses the client's or student's characteristics. Test selection and interpretation are done with an awareness of the degree to which items may be culturally biased or the norming sample not reflective or inclusive of the client's or student's diversity. Test users understand that age and physical disability differences may impact the client's ability to perceive and respond to test items. Test scores are interpreted in light of the cultural, ethnic, disability, or linguistic factors that may impact an individual's score. These include visual, auditory, and mobility disabilities that may require appropriate accommodation in test administration and scoring. Test users understand that certain types of norms and test score interpretation may be inappropriate, depending on the nature and purpose of the testing.

7. Knowledge and skill in the professionally responsible use of assessment and evaluation practice.

Professional counselors who use tests act in accordance with *ACA's Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice* (1997), *Responsibilities of Users of Standardized Tests* (RUST) (AAC, 2003), *Code of Fair Testing Practices in Education* (JCTP, 2002), *Rights and Responsibilities of Test Takers: Guidelines and Expectations* (JCTP, 2000), and *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* (AERA/APA/NCME, 1999). In addition, professional school counselors act in accordance with the American School Counselor Association's (ASCA's) *Ethical Standards for School Counselors* (ASCA, 1992). Test users should understand the legal and ethical principles and practices regarding test security, using copyrighted materials, and unsupervised use of assessment instruments that are not intended for self-administration. When using and supervising the use of tests, qualified test users demonstrate an acute understanding of the paramount importance of the well being of clients and the confidentiality of test scores. Test users seek on-going educational and training opportunities to maintain competence and acquire new skills in assessment and evaluation.

References:

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NOTE: The Standards for Test Use Task Force was an *ad hoc* committee of the American Counseling Association. The following counseling and education assessment professionals contributed to the drafting of this document: Dr. Bradley T. Erford (Chair), Mr. Alan Basham, Dr. Craig S. Cashwell, Dr. Gerald Juhnke, and Dr. Janet Wall.