

National Council on Measurement in Education Position Statement on the Use of College Admissions Test Scores as Academic Indicators in State Accountability Systems

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) has offered states increased flexibility in the ways tests can be used to support systems of educational accountability. However, this flexibility does not relieve users and test providers of the responsibility for documenting validity evidence that supports the purposes for which the scores are being used as called for by the 2014 edition of the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*:

Clear articulation of each intended test score interpretation for a specified use should be set forth, and appropriate validity evidence in support of each intended interpretation should be provided. (p. 23)¹

NCME recognizes that all tests have strengths and limitations with respect to their use in a given situation. NCME has always been concerned about the potential for inappropriate uses and interpretations associated with the scores from any test. However, the recent proliferation of college admissions tests as significant components of state accountability systems raises some specific concerns. This position statement focuses on three validity issues that arise when college admissions test scores are used as indicators of both high school achievement and growth in achievement: alignment to state content standards, alignment with students' competency levels, and the fairness of accommodations for students with disabilities and English learners.

Alignment with Content Standards

Both ESSA and established best practices in standards-based education require that assessments be aligned to the content standards adopted in each state. If a test is only partially aligned to state standards, educators and school leaders will be faced with a choice of teaching to the standards or teaching to the test; the latter can distort classroom practices. Because of this fact, and because the ACT and SAT have not historically been developed to be aligned to state-specific content standards, it is important that both the tests' developers and the states using these tests provide evidence of alignment, where such evidence has not already been publicly provided. This evidence should be vetted by an independent party and made publicly

¹ American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education (2014). *Standards for educational and psychological testing*. Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.

available. Since alignment is typically a matter of degree, the steps the test developers take to enhance alignment through state-specific changes to item design should be described and publicly disseminated (in a manner that does not jeopardize the security of the tests).

Alignment with Student Competency Levels

ESSA requires states to establish a minimum of three achievement levels to provide useful information for students scoring well above or below any one focal achievement level (e.g., “proficient”). For students whose performance represents a low or high level of achievement, the test items on the ACT and SAT may be too hard or too easy to provide reliable information about progress over time. When admissions tests are used for accountability purposes, evidence should be provided that there is sufficient score precision to make reliable distinctions among students across achievement levels. NCME also recommends that state-specific data be used in setting the cut scores for achievement levels.

Fairness of Test Accommodations

Students with disabilities and English learners taking state assessments may require accommodations that go beyond those traditionally offered to students taking the ACT and SAT. The issue of when and whether a test accommodation is justifiable can be complicated. Ideally, a test accommodation removes obstacles (i.e., *construct-irrelevant variance*) that make it unfairly challenging for students to fully engage with the test for reasons beyond their control. However, some accommodations may fundamentally alter the intended interpretation of a test score. In addition, accommodations can be abused if they are employed to gain an unfair advantage (e.g., increased time to take the test when it is not needed). Standards 3.9-3.14 (pp. 67-70) in the Fairness in Testing chapter of the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* provide some valuable guidelines for how this issue should be addressed. NCME recommends that admissions test developers and states work together to establish accommodations necessary for the accurate measurement of achievement and growth for students with disabilities and English language learners. Studies should be conducted periodically to demonstrate that accommodations are being correctly implemented and fulfilling their intended purpose.

Summary

A total of 26 states administered either the ACT or SAT to all students attending public high schools during the 2017-18 school year. In 11 of these states, one of these two tests served as the sole state-administered summative assessment in high school, and in these contexts, test

scores from the ACT or SAT were used as either an accountability indicator for academic achievement, student growth, or both.² The use of admissions test for these purposes seems to represent a growing trend. It has not been the purpose of this statement to take a position on whether this trend represents a positive or negative development. However, to the extent that these tests are now being used for purposes for which they were not originally intended, it becomes all the more important that they be supported by ongoing validity studies. NCME urges special attention to three potential validity issues: alignment with content standards, alignment with students' levels of competency, and fairness of test accommodations. These issues are by no means unique to college entrance exams; they are equally important for assessments designed for accountability purposes. By generating and sharing relevant evidence, inappropriate use and misinterpretation are less likely to occur.

About NCME: The National Council on Measurement in Education (NCME) is a professional organization for individuals involved in assessment, evaluation, testing, and other aspects of educational measurement. Members are involved in the construction and use of standardized tests; new forms of assessment, including performance-based assessment; program design; and program evaluation. NCME 3 members include university faculty; test developers; state and federal testing and research directors; professional evaluators; testing specialists in business, industry, education, community programs, and other professions; licensure, certification, and credentialing professionals; graduate students from educational, psychological, and other measurement programs; and others involved in testing issues and practices.

Approved by the NCME Board of Directors, June 14, 2019

² Sources: <http://ecs.force.com/mbdata/mbquestrt?rep=SUM1802> ;
<https://achieve.org/publications/2017%E2%80%9318-state-high-school-mathematics-assessments>