INFORMATIONAL SERIES NO. 4

CRITERION-REFERENCED PASSING SCORES

PROFESSIONAL EXAMINATION SERVICES

Purpose

The Office of Professional Examination Services (OPES) recommends a criterion-referenced passing score, which applies standards for competent practice to all candidates regardless of the form of the examination administered. A criterion-referenced passing score increases the likelihood that candidates who pass the licensure examination have sufficient knowledge and experience to practice safely and competently.

Process

OPES follows a criterion-referenced methodology called the "modified Angoff technique" for determining licensure examination passing scores. Standard setting is a group process. The group is composed of licensed practitioners representing all aspects of practice or profession and a test development specialist. The process should always include a number of newly licensed practitioners to ensure participation from entry-level licensees.

Criterion-referenced standard setting begins with the establishment of a minimally acceptable level of competence for safe practice that candidates must possess in order to pass the examination. The group develops common definitions of different levels of candidate performance by identifying critical work behaviors that contrast the highly competent, the minimally competent, and the incompetent candidate.

Advantages

Because licensing examinations are known to vary in difficulty from one examination form to another, a fixed passing score or percentage such as 70% does not represent the minimally acceptable competence for all administrations of an examination. Therefore, arbitrary passing scores are not considered legally defensible.

By applying a criterion-referenced methodology, a passing score is lowered for an examination containing a large number of difficult items (questions) and raised for an examination containing a small number of difficult items. Candidates who take a more difficult test would be placed at a disadvantage unless a criterion-referenced passing score is established. Thus, the passing score provides safeguards to both the candidate and the consumer affected by the particular profession.

Another advantage of using criterion-referenced methodology is that the passing score is independent of the performance of other candidates who take the examination at the same time. The passing score is not based on performance with respect to the group. Rather, the passing score is based upon the difficulty of the items within the examination.

Contact

To learn more about these and other examination-related services, please contact the Office of Professional Examination Services at (916) 575-7240.