



# CRITERION-REFERENCED PASSING SCORES

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*A criterion-referenced passing score applies minimum standards for competent practice to all candidates regardless of the form of the examination administered.*

## **Purpose**

By adopting a criterion-referenced passing score, a board or committee applies minimum standards for competent practice to all candidates regardless of the form of the examination administered. Adoption of a criterion-referenced passing score may ultimately result in the licensure of candidates who have sufficient knowledge and experience to ensure public health and safety.

## **Process**

Standard setting is a *group* process. The group should be composed of practitioners who are representative of all aspects of practice. To ensure that the description of the profession represents the job tasks of practitioners entering the profession, the standard setting process should always include a number of newly licensed practitioners.

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

One important advantage of applying a criterion-referenced methodology is that the passing score is lowered for an examination containing a large number of difficult items and raised for an examination containing a small number of difficult items. Candidates who take the more difficult test are 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.

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 upon performance with respect to the group. Rather, the passing score is based upon the difficulty of the items within the examination.