

RESULTS OF THE PASSING-SCORE STUDY FOR THE JANUARY 2012 RELEASE OF THE REGISTRATION EXAMINATION FOR DIETITIANS

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How are passing scores determined for the registration examinations for dietitians and dietetic technicians? This article describes the process leading to the passing score and its relationship to the test development cycle. Identical processes were used for setting the passing score on the dietitian and dietetic technician examinations.

CRITERION-REFERENCED TESTS VS NORM-REFERENCED TESTS

The Registration Examination for Dietitians and the Registration Examination for Dietetic Technicians are criterion-referenced tests. This means that each candidate for registration is measured against predefined criteria, rather than being measured in relation to other candidates. A more familiar example of criterion-referenced testing is the examination taken to obtain a driver's license. Each examinee is measured against a predetermined standard for performance, rather than being compared with other examinees. In criterion-referenced testing, it is theoretically possible for all candidates to pass an administration of the examination---it also is theoretically possible for all candidates to fail. In reality, it is more likely that some candidates will pass and some will fail.

The criterion-referenced approach to testing complements the purpose of the registration examinations: protection of the public. Criterion-referenced testing is a means of ensuring that only those candidates who have sufficient knowledge and skill for safe entry-level practice are granted registration.

Norm-referenced testing is another approach to testing. With this approach, candidates are compared with each other instead of being compared with a criterion. Theoretically, too many or too few candidates could be denied registration. If, in a pool of candidates, 30% actually possessed sufficient skills and knowledge for safe entry-level practice, but it has been determined that only the top 10% would be granted registration, then the examination would not be fulfilling its purpose. Another possibility is that only some of the candidates in the top 10% would have sufficient knowledge and skills for safe entry-level practice. Thus the norm-referenced approach would compromise protection of the public. The best way to ensure that protection of the public remains the focus of testing is to establish minimal competence as a criterion for safe entry-level practice.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE EXAMINATIONS

The two registration examinations follow exacting test development procedures that conform to the principles of sound testing programs in the professions. The examinations are practice based, which means that the tests are developed to reflect the problems and challenges that confront practicing entry-level dietitians and dietetic technicians. Development of the 2012 examinations began with a comprehensive role delineation study conducted by the American Dietetic Association (ADA) in consultation with Readex Research and ACT in 2010.