NCTA PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR POST-SECONDARY TEST CENTERS

PURPOSE AND BENEFITS

The NCTA Standards and Guidelines are intended to serve as a model for post-secondary test centers in the delivery of quality testing services. The term "test center" in this document refers to the office or portion of an office at an educational institution that is responsible for test administration duties. This includes delivery of national standardized tests, placement exams, classroom makeup tests, non-standard exam administrations for students with disabilities, certification exams, distance exams, etc. Since 2010, these Standards and Guidelines have been used in the NCTA Test Center Certification program to ensure that certified centers are following best practices.

This document contains two major divisions, the Standards and the Guidelines. The Standards contain policy and broader issues applicable to all test centers, while the Guidelines are very specific steps or procedures for **Paper-Based Testing (PBT)** and **Computer-Based Testing (CBT)**. The Guidelines are intended to provide helpful information to new testing professionals, institutional personnel setting up a new test center, or test center staff who are reorganizing an existing test center.

The NCTA Standards and Guidelines endorse requirements without directly enforcing them, allowing discretion appropriate to specific programs. They have been and will continue to be updated by NCTA to reflect developments in the testing field. These Standards and Guidelines have important benefits for all involved in the testing process:

Benefits for Examinees
- Inform and promote quality test administration services for enrolled students, potential students, and community members.
- Offer the best opportunity for students to demonstrate their knowledge, potentially improving the accuracy of test results.

Benefits for Test Companies (any organization that contracts with test centers to administer tests)
- Promote standardized testing environments.
- Facilitate and simplify test site selection process by encouraging a pool of test centers that adhere to established standards.
- Improve communications with test centers by clarifying roles and expectations.
- Provide test company clients with a set of professional standards and guidelines.
- Promote a multi-user environment so that test centers may be compatible with the specifications of a variety of test companies.
- Raise the awareness of all parties regarding appropriate testing conditions and procedures for standardized testing.
- Provide Guidelines that can be used by test centers not on college campuses.

Benefits for Test Centers
- Enhance professional stature of test center and staff.
- Provide a single set of criteria, written by testing professionals of varying levels and perspectives, lessening the need to monitor and adhere to multiple sets of standards.
- Provide the information needed to establish an excellent test center with an optimal environment for enrolled and potential students, distance education students, and community members.
- Improve communications with test companies by encouraging more direct contact.

Benefits for Institutions
- Provide guidelines for professional testing services that reflect positively on the college or university.
- Support enrollment and retention by providing quality testing services to current and potential students.
- Provide quality services to people external to the institution, including community members who need to take certification exams or distance exams, enhancing stature and visibility of the institution.
- Support the institution's missions and standards.

Benefits for NCTA
- Demonstrate that enhancement of professionalism in the field of testing is a primary purpose of NCTA, increasing the value of belonging to an association with professional standards.
- Provide the underlying structure for the NCTA Test Center Certification program for test centers at educational institutions.
- Encourage interaction with non-member test centers and staff, as well as other associations and organizations, regarding testing standards and other concerns in the testing field, increasing NCTA resources.

I. STANDARDS FOR TEST CENTERS

The Standards in this document are organized into six sections: Policy, Contractual Agreements, Staffing, College or University Representation and Coordination, Physical Environment, and Testing Accommodations. Certain items pertain to CBT or PBT only. If unspecified, items cover both types of testing.

A. POLICY: Test Centers must adhere to general policies which promote high quality operations, ethical practices as outlined in the *Code of Fair Testing Practices in Education (2004, Washington, DC: Joint Committee on Testing Practices)*, professional mandates, and policies consistent with their institutions and NCTA. They must

1. Develop and implement a mission statement consistent with the policies and standards set forth in this document as well as their institutional mission.

2. Operate with adequate financial resources to support the mission of the test center.

3. Maintain adequate physical facilities in a location suitable to the requirements of the test center and the needs of examinees, which includes compliance with minimum legal requirements of the **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)**.

4. Operate in a diligent manner to promote honesty, integrity, and fairness in all procedures.

5. Operate under the guidelines of equal opportunity, affirmative action, and the ADA, as well as other local, state, and federal regulations.

6. Protect the integrity of the test by following appropriate exam handling and storage procedures and by ensuring vigilant proctoring.

7. Protect the confidentiality and rights of privacy of examinees and staff, defined by FERPA and other regulations.

8. Adhere to program requirements of test companies in the administration of specific tests.

9. Adhere to requirements and policies of their institutions in the administration of classroom exams and other assessments.

10. Treat examinees in a fair, courteous, professional, and nondiscriminatory manner.

11. Respond to examinee concerns with respect while maintaining the integrity of the administration.

12. Make referrals to other campus offices and testing resources, as needed, to provide students and clients with the most appropriate services of the institution and community.

13. Develop and implement site specific guidelines for test center operations and staff training.

14. Evaluate the programs of the test center in an on-going, systematic, and comprehensive manner.

B. CONTRACTUAL AGREEMENTS: Test companies and test centers (or appropriate institutional representatives) will sign contractual agreements for test delivery services.

1. Agreements will clearly define the responsibilities and expectations of both parties regarding the following concerns:

a. Physical environment and space requirements.
b. Candidate scheduling protocol.
c. Administrator/Proctor responsibilities for exam delivery.
d. System specifications for CBT.
e. Test company support, including technical support, if applicable.
f. Payment method and fee schedule, including compensation for no-shows and accommodated tests.
g. Liability issues.

2. Contracts may refer to Proctor or Administrator manuals for details on any of the above components. These manuals and other documentation need to be reviewed prior to signing the agreement since companies may have very specific, unique requirements for their testing programs. If a potential conflict is discovered, a solution may be able to be reached through open dialogue between the test company and an individual test center. This will necessitate a revision to the contract before it can be signed.

3. Contracts and agreements must be signed by an individual within the institution who has signature authority for legal agreements. Consultation with an institution's legal department may be required. In some instances, a **Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)** or letter of intent may be used in place of a formal contract. Contracts will be signed by both parties before set-up and testing activities begin. After a contract is signed and in effect, both parties will work together to address areas where expectations are not being met.

C. STAFFING: A number of individuals may be involved in the setup, coordination, and administration of tests. These may include staff of the institution (both full-time and part-time) and/or staff hired only for particular testing situations. If undergraduate students are employed in the test center, they perform office tasks but do not administer tests, for their own protection as well as to preserve test integrity. Exceptions may be made for adult staff members who are taking undergraduate classes but who are primarily institutional personnel. In all cases, regardless of how specific tasks are divided up or covered by various individuals, one person must be accountable. This person may have a different title at each institution but will be referred to here as the **Test Operations Manager (TOM)**.

1. The TOM is ultimately responsible for the appropriate administration of testing programs. S/he coordinates all test administrations and may serve as the actual test administrator or may hire others for test day administration. The TOM

   a. Is an employee of the institution.
   b. Is knowledgeable about test policies, processes, and procedures.
   c. Is informed about all incidents occurring during testing, e.g. irregularities, facilities or environmental problems, and examinee or staff concerns.
   d. Conducts appropriate training for testing personnel, both part-time and full-time, to include all aspects of test administration, including management of emergency situations such as fire, power outages, illness, etc.
   e. Participates in professional development activities to stay current with trends and best practices in testing.
   f. Ensures the test center and all testing staff are evaluated at regular intervals.
   g. Is able to communicate effectively with a wide range of individuals.
   h. Provides direct oversight for testing activities and is responsible for adherence to all standards in this document.

2. Specific responsibilities of the TOM for National Testing Programs (PBT and CBT) include

   a. Serving as administrator of record with the test companies, though not necessarily acting as an on-site Test Supervisor for PBT or as a **Test Center Administrator (TCA)** for CBT testing.
   b. Maintaining direct contact with test company personnel.
   c. Ensuring test company requirements for each program are fulfilled.
   d. Maintaining adequate staff to cover testing program requirements.

3. Specific responsibilities of the TOM for <u>College/University Testing Programs</u> include

   a. Serving as the primary contact in the test center for faculty, departments, and testing programs.
   b. Actively managing the overall test center operations, though others in the test center may have more regular contact with institutional faculty, department staff, and distance learning faculty and staff.
   c. Fulfilling requirements for departmental or college/university testing, including distance learning programs.
   d. Informing faculty or departments of any limitations of services, as well as concerns or problems encountered in delivering exams.
   e. Maintaining adequate staff to cover testing requirements.

4. Other Staff Needed for Testing – <u>National Testing Programs</u>: Test Supervisors, room supervisors, and proctors may be regular staff of the institution or contract workers hired solely for testing. It is important to avoid the reality or perception of a conflict of interest in the selection of staff, such as not administering tests to family members, not being involved in inappropriate test preparation or coaching activities, etc. Efforts will be made to hire diverse staff. It is imperative that test day staff

   a. Attend general proctor or supervisor training, including day-of-test staff briefings.
   b. Understand the concepts of standardized testing, the importance of test security, and the implications of testing irregularities.
   c. Be prepared to handle emergency situations.
   d. Thoroughly review test-related information such as test manuals prior to test day, concentrating on test-specific policies and procedures.
   e. Be reliable, punctual, detail-oriented, and able to deal effectively with people in difficult situations.
   f. Be able to communicate effectively with a wide range of individuals.
   g. Serve as a room proctor before becoming a room supervisor.
   h. Undergo performance evaluations at regular intervals.

5. Other Staff Needed for Testing – <u>CBT Testing</u>: Staff (often TCAs) for CBT are usually full-time or part-time permanent employees of the institution but can be contract workers. It is imperative that these individuals

   a. Be thoroughly trained before working on their own, with ongoing training/certification as necessary and/or required by the test company.
   b. Understand the concepts of standardized testing, the importance of test security, and the implications of testing irregularities, including how to handle emergency situations.
   c. Be thoroughly informed on the policies and procedures for all exam programs they will be administering.
   d. Be aware of best practices in test delivery and in providing good customer service.
   e. Be reliable, punctual, detail-oriented, and able to deal effectively with people in difficult situations.
   f. Be able to communicate effectively with a wide range of individuals.
   g. Be able to do basic computer trouble-shooting as needed.
   h. Undergo performance evaluations at regular intervals.

6. Other Staff Needed for <u>College/University Testing, including Distance Learning Programs</u>: Personnel for this type of testing may include full-time or part-time employees of the institution, including front office staff. Testing may be only part of a staff member's total duties and responsibilities. It is imperative that these individuals

   a. Understand the requirement for security and confidentiality of test materials (including items such as passwords) and examinee information.
   b. Receive training appropriate to their role in the testing process.
   c. Be thoroughly informed about test policies and procedures, especially test-specific ones.
   d. Be able to do basic computer trouble-shooting for CBT.
   e. Assist the TOM and other staff members with assigned responsibilities and duties.
   f. Be aware of best practices in test delivery and in providing good customer service.

g. Be reliable, punctual, detail-oriented, and able to deal effectively with people in difficult situations.
h. Be prepared to deal with emergency situations.
i. Be able to communicate effectively with a wide range of individuals.
j. Undergo performance evaluations at regular intervals.

D. COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY REPRESENTATION AND COORDINATION: The TOM is responsible for advocating for the needs of the test center through appropriate channels at his/her college or university. In addition, test center personnel must make formal and informal connections across the campus for the purposes of informing others about testing services, promoting appropriate interaction between the test center and other institutional departments, and ensuring appropriate facilities for test administration. Institutional representation and coordination are intended to establish and maintain administrative support for testing functions and increase visibility for the test center on campus and in the community.

1. The test center will be represented at various levels within the organizational structure. As needs are identified, the TOM will make these needs, and the resources required, known to the appropriate personnel and offices in the institution.

2. To develop an effective communication network with departments that provide campus services, test centers must

   a. Develop working relationships with campus resource personnel who authorize access to appropriate facilities. Coordinate with appropriate institutional departments to ensure all relevant services are provided. Contact and confirm with department contacts (e.g., Facilities Management, Public Safety/Security, Energy Management, Buildings and Grounds, Plant Operations, Mail Center, IT Support, etc.) to ensure that buildings and rooms are unlocked, temperature systems are in place, required equipment is available and functioning, and room setup is optimal.
   b. Communicate assessment goals and objectives across the campus and in the community on a regular basis.

3. To implement appropriate public relations activities on behalf of the test center, it is important to

   a. Heighten awareness of the test center and its services by providing up-to-date information via flyers, brochures, newsletters, web pages, correspondence, etc., on a regular basis.
   b. Encourage appropriate use of testing services within and outside of the campus community in compliance with the test center's mission and goals.

4. To achieve efficient, reliable, and timely test administrations of current or prospective students of the institution (placement exams, institutional and/or national exams, and credit by exam), test centers must

   a. Develop effective working relationships with faculty and institutional departments.
   b. Collaborate and communicate with faculty and academic departments about policies and procedures for the administration of exams and assessments.
   c. Maintain and/or securely store appropriate records (e.g., test tracking logs, program statistics, and/or exam scores).

5. To achieve efficient, reliable, and timely test administrations for the external community (distance education, national test programs, testing companies/organizations, etc.), test centers must

   a. Develop effective working relationships with external agencies.
   b. Collaborate and communicate with external agencies about policies and procedures for all test administrations.
   c. Create, maintain, and securely store appropriate records as needed or required.

E. PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT: The location, space, and layout of the test center are vital to the accomplishment of its mission. In addition, the conditions under which tests are handled, stored, and administered are extremely important. The standardization of these conditions is essential to the integrity of every test administration.

1. To ensure security of materials, the area where test materials are stored must

    a. Be locked with no insecure points of access, e.g., windows, transoms, false ceilings, etc.
    b. Have access limited to key testing personnel.

2. At the test site, the TOM and/or staff must

    a. Maintain a distraction-reduced testing environment, anticipate outside factors that may divert the attention of examinees, and take action to avoid these potential problems.
    b. Consider room temperature and attempt to correct, as needed.
    c. Ensure adequate lighting.
    d. Provide appropriate test room(s) and space for given volume.
    e. Provide seating and writing surfaces appropriate for test volume, test materials, candidate characteristics, ADA accommodations, etc.
    f. Seat examinees to limit their view of other examinees' tests and to facilitate proctoring, following test program specifications.
    g. Check facility to ensure readiness for testing.
    h. Have backup plans in case of emergencies or problems, if possible. Contact test company about a shift to any backup plan.

3. Access to the test site requires that

    a. Adequate parking is available.
    b. ADA requirements are met so examinees with disabilities can access the test center. The TOM should consult with the appropriate campus office to ensure compliance with ADA laws and regulations.

4. CBT: Equipment and Space

    a. Testing contracts will specify that equipment is dedicated for use by one test company's programs or, if agreed to by test center and companies, equipment can be used by multiple companies. Contracts will specify who will retain ownership of the equipment, along with the responsbility to install updates. Test centers will keep the space clean and uncluttered and maintain appropriate temperature control to ensure equipment function.
    b. If a separate room is required for accommodations but is not available, the test center will attempt to schedule the test outside of regular testing hours so the entire center does not need to be shut down. If this is not possible, then the room will be used only for the accommodated test. Compensation for these different arrangements should be specified beforehand, preferably in the contract.

F. TESTING ACCOMMODATIONS: In order to comply with the ADA and the institutional mission of serving students, it is important for test centers to be fully informed about what is required legally and ethically to assist students with disabilities. Test centers will

1. Collaborate with Disability Services offices on campus to determine who will provide needed accommodations. The test center will provide approved accommodations for classroom exams, if separate facilities for accommodated testing are not available on campus.

2. Provide accommodations to people with disabilities, as specified by test company requirements, for national and certain institutional exams.

    a. If the accommodation requires only a minor modification that will not disturb others, the person may be tested in a room with other examinees.
    b. If the accommodation, such as reading aloud, may distract others, a separate room will be provided.

II.   GUIDELINES FOR TEST CENTERS

The Guidelines noted here are listed as procedural steps rather than detailed instructions, e.g., "Ensure accurate timing of test " rather than "Keep time using [specific] method." Although they parallel content from many test manuals, they are not totally reflective of these instructions. They are generic enough to conform to requirements of all test programs, referring to the manual ("according to program requirements") where compliance with the Guideline is defined by adherence to the test company's stated procedure. These specific Guidelines may be particularly helpful for newer testing staff who are in the process of learning test administration procedures or for individuals and institutions setting up new test centers.

A.   Paper-Based Tests (PBT)

1. Before the test, the TOM and/or staff

   a.   Schedule an adequate number of trained staff, per program requirements, and have backup available, if possible.
   b.   Perform check of testing facilities and equipment for operating conditions and security.
   c.   Check rest rooms to be sure they are secure.
   d.   Receive and/or count material; reconcile discrepancies.
   e.   Divide material per room assignments.
   f.   Store materials securely.
   g.   Prepare staff for administrations with thorough review of manual or instructor guidelines.
   h.   Ensure that all necessary equipment is in proper working order.
   i.   Make appropriate campus contacts, such as calling the campus security office or reserving rooms through a designated office.
   j.   Ensure proper reporting address on national exam roster; reconcile errors.
   k.   For institutional tests, communicate necessary information to examinees, such as date, time, and location of test as well as items to bring to the test, if needed.
   l.   Post directional signs and room assignments on test day.

2. To facilitate the admitting process, test day staff
   a.   Check for valid, current photo identification and admit examinees according to program requirements or institutional specifications.
   b.   For classroom exams, verify student's enrollment and eligibility to take the test, if necessary.
   c.   Contact test company or instructor to resolve discrepancies.
   d.   Assign seats randomly according to program guidelines.

3. To ensure the best possible testing conditions during the administration and to ensure standardization of the exam, test day supervisor and staff

   a.   Make general housekeeping announcements (location of rest rooms, etc.).
   b.   Actively proctor test and ensure that all staff get to take short breaks to maintain alertness but never leave a room unsupervised.
   c.   Maintain physical security of materials and watch exits, especially during break times. Recheck ID after breaks, according to test or institutional guidelines.
   d.   Observe examinees without being intrusive.
   e.   Handle irregularities and potential security breaches according to program or university policies.
   f.   Complete seating charts and other forms, according to program requirements.
   g.   Distribute and collect materials individually and reconcile counts at all times.
   h.   Respond to examinee questions about testing procedure and provide information about completing answer sheets and forms. Never discuss or respond to questions from examinees about exam content.
   i.   Read instructions clearly and verbatim. Answer examinee questions accurately.
   j.   Ensure accurate timing of test.
   k.   Call test company or instructor immediately, if necessary, to resolve questionable situations.

4. After the test, the TOM and/or test day staff

   a. Follow end-of-test procedures from instructor or test company.
   b. Count and secure materials before dismissing examinees.
   c. Prepare reports and forms. Submit information or paperwork for staff/institutional payment.
   d. Arrange pickup/shipping, as necessary (according to test company specifications and local system).
   e. Retain test administration documents (i.e. rosters, seating charts, vouchers, reports, etc.) for at least one year unless otherwise specified by test company.
   f. Follow up on staff payment from test companies, if it is not received within the expected timeframe.
   g. Track revenue that comes to the institution and ensure that payment is received.
   h. Handle staff questions and problems. Utilize problems that occur, solutions used, and lessons learned to train staff on how to handle future test administrations and irregularities.

B. Computer-Based Tests (CBT)

To conduct CBT in a high quality standardized setting, always follow the methods and activities as shown in the procedural manuals for the specific test. Strive to ensure the best possible testing conditions are provided while maintaining standardized procedures. Below are best practices for efficient CBT administrations.

1. Facilities

   a. Ensure physical space meets program specifications.
   b. Regularly check testing facilities and equipment for operating condition and security.
   c. Restrict test room access to examinees and approved testing staff.
   d. Provide appropriate and secure storage for examinee belongings, ensuring that examinees do not have access to their belongings while testing.

2. Staff

   a. Ensure appropriate training and certification for staff, according to program guidelines.
   b. Renew certification status as needed.
   c. Assign usernames and passwords to staff, according to program requirements.
   d. Guard all usernames, passwords, and codes, keeping them confidential. Staff members should not share usernames and passwords with examinees or anyone else.
   e. Schedule an adequate number of trained staff per program requirements.
   f. Maintain lines of communication with internal and external technical and operational support.

3. Equipment – Hardware/Software

   a. Maintain hardware and software according to program guidelines.
   b. Ensure all equipment is in working order.
   c. Appropriately assign administrative computer work station and examinee work stations.
   d. Prepare and test video, audio, imaging, biometric, and other systems.
   e. Record test sessions with video or audio equipment, if required, according to program guidelines and/or test center policy.
   f. Ensure that appropriate IT support is in place to assist with problems that interfere with test delivery.

4. Supplies and Materials

   a. Ensure availability of required forms, documents, and supplies, e.g., pencils, pens, earplugs, scratch paper, etc.
   b. Complete required forms.
   c. Prepare information and documents for issuance to examinees.

5. Test Administration Procedures

    a. Perform examinee check-in functions based on program requirements.
    b. Collect required authorizations, vouchers, or other documents.
    c. Provide general and specific program instructions to each examinee.
    d. Respond to questions and problems regarding procedures and directions only. Never discuss or respond to questions from examinees about examination content.
    e. Distribute ancillary materials, e.g., scratch paper, writing utensils, calculators, etc.
    f. Maintain security of the examination, software, and equipment by monitoring examinees through glass viewing window, on video monitors, or by proctoring, according to program requirements.
    g. Monitor scheduled and unscheduled examinee breaks. Recheck examinee IDs or perform other check-in procedures after breaks, as specified by program requirements.
    h. Ensure accurate timing according to specific program or institutional requirements. Record testing time for each examinee, if required.
    i. Manage, document, and report irregularities when they occur.
    j. Contact program technical support, as needed, to resolve system problems.

6. Closing/Ending Test Session

    a. Collect and verify materials and supplies.
    b. Perform examinee-related check-out procedures according to program or institutional guidelines.
    c. Ensure confidentiality of exam results.
    d. Complete forms and return materials according to program or institutional specifics.
    e. Perform end-of-day procedures according to program, institutional, and test center guidelines.

CONCLUSION

The NCTA Standards and Guidelines are intended to encourage testing professionals to align their procedures with best practices. If NCTA members need more information and guidance, they should take advantage of the online and interactive resources of the organization to access the expertise of other members. Each office is unique, but following the NCTA Standards and Guidelines brings excellence to the test center and professional satisfaction to the testing staff.

Historical Note: Standards and Guidelines for test centers were first written by the Midwest Professional Association of College Testing Personnel (MPACT) Professional Development Committee as an outgrowth of discussions about test center certification. The committee agreed that standards needed to be developed before certification could be considered. Test company and test center staff representing MPACT, the SouthEastern Testing Association (SETA), and the Texas Association of Collegiate Testing Personnel (TACTP) worked together to develop the standards. When MPACT and other regional organizations became the National College Testing Association (NCTA) in Spring 2000, the Standards and Guidelines were adopted as official policy of the organization.