

Use of High Stakes Testing or Single Assessment Approaches in Nursing Education Programs

Statement of Purpose

To provide guidance to nursing faculty on appropriate and fair methods to assess student attainment of program, level, and course outcomes. This interpretative statement focuses on high stakes testing or a single assessment event that halts student progression.

Background/Significance

Evaluative measures are utilized in all nursing education programs to determine student achievement of course and/or program outcomes. Nursing faculty are responsible to develop, integrate and evaluate student learning experiences and policies related to progression and graduation per Oregon Administrative Rule Division 21 (851-021-0045(11)(a) through (f). The faculty responsibility includes defining outcomes, determining teaching-learning tools appropriate to meet those outcomes, and assessment methods to show attainment of outcomes. A thorough review of literature on assessment of outcomes is the essential foundation to setting appropriate grading and progression policies.

Vendor-developed examination products are utilized in a variety of ways by nursing programs. The range of use of these products includes serving as:

1. Study resources
2. Practice examinations for NCLEX® preparation
3. One part of a comprehensive evaluation strategy
4. Predictor examinations to determine whether a student will complete the program and be given a final transcript (such as NCLEX® Predictor Examinations).

Several State Boards of Nursing and national organizations have developed guidelines, white papers, and position statements on the use of standardized examinations in nursing education programs. They have also examined fair approaches to testing in response to data showing an increasing prevalence in the use of examinations in a manner considered to be high stakes. (*NLN Fair Testing Imperative in Nursing Education, 2012*).

Board Statement

The use of assessment measures related to progression and program completion requires that the measures be valid, evidence-based, applied consistently, and non-discriminatory. Multiple measures are needed to determine whether students have met required course, level, and/or program outcomes. **The use of one assessment event that is the sole or primary determinant of progression or program completion (high stakes testing) is not consistent with current evidence-based education practices. Consequently, high stakes testing requires a thorough review and analysis by nursing faculty.**

Analysis of Assessment Measures

Nursing faculty are responsible to conduct reasoned analysis of student assessment measures, including, but not limited to, consideration of the questions below.

Indicators of Assessment Method Appropriateness:

1. Does the assessment method have a clear link to the defined outcomes?

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2. Are multiple assessment methods in place to show student attainment of outcomes?
3. Have other assessment methods been considered?
4. Is the amount of time spent on assessment activities congruent with course credits and outcomes?
5. Are data available related to the reliability and validity of the examination/assessment method?
6. Are there multiple opportunities for students to develop understanding of the concepts related to the outcomes?
7. Is student progression linked to one assessment event used in a high stakes manner? If so, analysis of the following questions is the responsibility of the faculty.
 - A. Is evidence in place and accessible to show faculty analysis of the appropriateness of using one high stakes assessment?
 - B. Is the achievement of mastery in a content area considered essential to client safety?
 - C. Is the single high stakes assessment event and attainment standard clearly articulated for students in advance in writing?
 - D. Are students provided an analysis of their performance on the assessment?
 - E. Are students provided an opportunity for remediation with faculty guidance in areas of weakness?
 - F. Are students provided more than one opportunity to show mastery of the defined outcomes?

Additional Considerations for vendor-developed high stakes assessment tools:

1. If a single high stakes assessment method is vendor-developed, have the nursing faculty been oriented to the development of the tool, psychometric parameters, how to administer the assessment, scoring reports, and research on predictive capability?
2. Have faculty determined how to translate scoring from vendor-developed assessments into the grading for a particular course?
3. Have students been oriented to vendor-provided assessment tools?
4. Have nursing faculty analyzed the appropriate placement of the vendor-developed assessment relative to the curriculum outcomes?
5. Is the vendor-developed assessment tool being applied for its purpose and in a manner supported by the vendor's stated purpose?

Definitions

- **Assessment:** Assessment is the process of gathering and discussing information from multiple and diverse sources in order to develop a deep understanding of what students know, understand, and can do with their knowledge as a result of their educational experiences; the process culminates when assessment results are used to improve subsequent learning. (Huba and Freed, 2000)
- **High Stakes:**
 - High-stakes assessment is defined as the practice of basing major decisions on individual student performance on a single assessment event (e.g. one examination, one skills demonstration, one paper).
 - "High stakes" means that a single test (performance) score is used to determine advancement.
 - What distinguishes a high-stakes test from a low-stakes test is not its form (how the test is designed) but its function (how the results are used). (The Glossary of Education Reform, 2014)
- **Vendor Developed:** An examination or assessment tool developed by an entity external to the nursing faculty that is offered to a large volume of similar students from a consistent question bank that provides comparative results.

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Questions and Answers

Q: Do all nursing programs have to use standardized or predictor examinations?

A: No. There is no requirement that vendor developed, external, standardized examinations be used to prepare students for NCLEX®.

Q: As long as students are allowed multiple attempts to pass a vendor developed examination, may the exam be used to halt progression or to prevent graduation from a nursing program?

A: This is a high-stakes testing method. The number of attempts allowed is a decision to be made by the nursing faculty. Using one assessment score (even if repeated attempts are allowed) as the sole or primary determinant of student progression or program completion is not generally consistent with best practices in assessment of course/program outcomes.

Q: Does this interpretive statement mean a program may use a vendor developed standardized exam as part of a required NCLEX® preparation course prior to graduation?

A: Yes. Any assessment method should be used only after consideration of the questions above. The Board of Nursing, students, or interested members of the public may ask nursing faculty to provide the rationale for the use of these exams and how the results are used.

Q: Is it permissible for a school to allow a student to graduate, but withhold the release of a transcript to the state board of nursing until a student meets an established benchmark on a vendor developed exam?

A: This interpretive statement does not prohibit this practice but the nursing faculty are expected to have completed an analysis of the appropriateness of this practice within a particular program or institution with the questions above as part of the decision-making.

Q: Our students have to pass a math test before they are released to participate in clinical learning experiences. Two attempts to attain the required score are allowed. A student unable to demonstrate the math competency after the second attempt would receive a failing grade for clinical. Is this considered high stakes testing?

A: Yes. Faculty may utilize this type of high stakes testing provided a thorough analysis of the approach has been completed. This math test may be considered by the faculty to be essential to the safety of clients in the clinical area and thus warrants a high stakes approach to assessment. (See page 2, #7.B.)

Q: If a program requires students to demonstrate passing performance in a final skills or simulation scenario to pass a course, is this a high stakes assessment?

A: Yes. The demonstration of course outcomes through skills demonstrations or responses to simulation scenarios would likely be one of many methods to assess student attainment of course outcomes but would be a high stakes approach, if failing to demonstrate the skill leads to a course failure. See above section, Indicators of Assessment Method Appropriateness, page 2, #7, A-F.

Q: In the pharmacology course, the grade is determined by averaging four separate unit examinations. Since the grade is based only on exams, is this considered a high-stakes approach?

A: No. The use of several exams that provide a cumulative grade is not a high stakes approach to testing.

Q: If a course includes several assessment methods such as quizzes, exams and papers but the student fails the course because of not achieving a grade on the final exam to offset earlier low grades, doesn't that final exam become a high stakes exam?

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A: No. The student has been offered multiple ways to show their attainment of the course outcomes. The grade is still based on all the required assessment elements for the course.

Q: What does a nursing program need to do if high stakes assessment approaches are currently being used?

A: If the use of this assessment approach has not been thoroughly considered in light of the questions above, the faculty should set a time to meet and conduct a review. Documentation of the faculty considerations associated with any high stakes assessment approaches should be available for review during program survey visits.

References

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The Oregon State Board of Nursing (OSBN) is authorized by Oregon Revised Statutes Chapter 678 to exercise general supervision over the practice of nursing in Oregon to include regulation of nursing licensure, education, and practice in order to assure that the citizens of Oregon receive safe and effective care. The OSBN further interprets statute and rule and issues opinions in the form of Policy and Interpretive Statements. These policies and interpretive statements are advisory in nature and issued as guidelines for safe nursing practice.