



# Standard Setting for Licensure Examinations

Michael Kane, Ph.D.

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AALS, San Francisco

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# Articles on Standard Setting

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- [www.ncbex.org](http://www.ncbex.org) Bar Examiner 2002 #3,4
- [www.ncbex.org/pubs/pdf/710302\\_kane.pdf](http://www.ncbex.org/pubs/pdf/710302_kane.pdf)
- [www.ncbex.org/pubs/pdf/710402\\_kane.pdf](http://www.ncbex.org/pubs/pdf/710402_kane.pdf)

# Basic Principles

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- Standard setting is a judgment-based exercise in policy-making.
  - The question to be addressed is how good is good enough.
  - The policy can be informed by relevant data, but data alone do not determine policy.
  - The policy-making body gets to make the final decisions about the appropriate standard.
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# Some Easy Cases of Standard Setting

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- Requirement for a certain number of life jackets on a cruise ship
- Requirement that buildings be able to withstand earthquakes of a certain magnitude
- Requirement that employees hired to perform some task (e.g. open certain valves) have the strength or skill to perform the task

# What Makes these Easy Cases So Easy?

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- The variable on which the standard is being set is directly related to some valued outcome.
- There are clear grounds for setting the standard at a certain level (e.g., a life jacket for every person on the ship, level of strength needed to open certain valves).

# Setting Standards for Licensure Examinations Is Not So Easy.

- Licensure applies to a wide range of activities in a wide range of situations.
- So, rather than evaluate performances on a specific task, licensure examinations typically evaluate broadly defined cognitive skills that are needed in practice.
- There is no natural minimum requirement for these cognitive skills, but we want assurance that new practitioners have demonstrated some reasonable level of skill.
- So, in standard-setting studies, panelists who are familiar with entry-level practice are asked to develop a standard of performance for admission to practice.

# The Performance Standard and the Passing Score

- The performance standard is a description of the level of competence (e.g., in applying legal principles to fact situations) needed for entry-level practice.
- The passing score is a specific test score that is used to make pass/fail decisions. Candidates pass if their scores are at or above the passing score, and fail if their scores are below the passing score.

# Two Main Tasks in Setting Standards

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- There are two interwoven tasks in standard setting:
  - To develop/describe the performance standard
  - To determine the corresponding passing score
- Standard-setting studies tend to focus on the second of these, but they also need to define the performance standard.



# Standard-Setting Studies



The goal is to identify a reasonable standard.  
Not too high – Not too low

# When to Conduct a Standard-Setting Study

- The standards should be reviewed periodically, just as other policies are reviewed periodically.
- If the tests are statistically equated to maintain score meaning, it is not necessary or desirable to conduct formal standard-setting studies very often.
- Indications of a need to conduct a standard-setting study:
  - changes in practice environment
  - concerns about new practitioners
  - length of time since last study

# Models for Standard-setting Studies

- **Test-centered Model:** Panelists make judgments about item difficulty (e.g., “What percentage of candidates who just meet the performance standard would answer this item correctly?”)
- **Examinee-centered Model:** Panelists make judgments about candidate performances relative to the performance standard (e.g., “Does this performance on the examination indicate that the candidate is ready for practice?”)
- Statistical models are then used to convert the judgments to an estimated passing score

# How to Conduct an Examinee-centered Study

- Select samples of performance for candidates with known scores on the examination.
- Recruit panelists who are familiar with standards of practice in entry level positions.
- Have panelists evaluate whether candidate performances meet the performance standard.
- Use relationship between evaluations of performance and scores on the licensure examination to estimate the passing score.