Usability, Accessibility, and Accommodations Guidelines

Introduction

The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (Smarter Balanced) strives to provide every student with a positive and productive assessment experience, generating results that are a fair and accurate estimate of each student’s achievement. Further, Smarter Balanced is building on a framework of accessibility for all students, including English Language Learners (ELLs), students with disabilities, and ELLs with disabilities, but not limited to those groups. In the process of developing its next-generation assessments to measure students’ knowledge and skills as they progress toward college and career readiness, Smarter Balanced recognized that the validity of assessment results depends on each and every student having appropriate universal tools, designated supports, and accommodations when needed based on the constructs being measured by the assessment. This document was developed for the Smarter Balanced member states to guide the selection and administration of universal tools, designated supports, and accommodations.

The Smarter Balanced assessment is based on the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Thus, the universal tools, designated supports, and accommodations that are appropriate for the Smarter Balanced assessment may be different from those that states allowed in the past. For the secure summative assessments, a state can only make available to students the universal tools, designated supports, and accommodations that are included in the Smarter Balanced Usability, Accessibility, and Accommodations Guidelines. A member state may elect not to make available to its students, any universal tool, designated support, or accommodation that is otherwise included in the Guidelines when the implementation or use of the universal tool, designated support, or accommodation is in conflict with a member state’s law, regulation, or policy.

These Guidelines describe the Smarter Balanced universal tools, designated supports, and accommodations available for the Smarter Balanced assessments at this time (see Appendix A). The specific universal tools, designated supports, and accommodations approved by Smarter Balanced may change in the future if additional tools, supports or accommodations are identified for the assessment based on state experience and research findings. The Consortium will establish a standing committee, including members from Governing States that will review suggested additional universal tools, designated supports, and accommodations to determine if changes are warranted. Proposed changes to the list of universal tools, designated supports, and accommodations will be brought to Governing States for review, input, and vote for approval. Furthermore, states may issue temporary approvals (i.e., one summative assessment administration) for individual unique student accommodations. State leads will evaluate formal requests for unique accommodations and determine whether or not the request poses a threat to the measurement of the construct. Upon issuing a temporary approval, the State will send documentation of the approval to the Consortium. The Consortium will consider all state approved temporary accommodations as part of the annual Consortium accommodations review process. The Consortium will provide to member states a list of the temporary accommodations issued by states that are not Consortium approved accommodations.

Intended Audience and Recommended Use

The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium’s Usability, Accessibility, and Accommodations Guidelines are intended for school-level personnel and decision-making teams, particularly Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams, as they prepare for and implement the Smarter Balanced assessment. The Guidelines provide information for classroom teachers, English
development educators, special education teachers, and related services personnel to use in selecting and administering universal tools, designated supports, and accommodations for those students who need them. The Guidelines are also intended for assessment staff and administrators who oversee the decisions that are made in instruction and assessment.

The Smarter Balanced Guidelines apply to all students. They emphasize an individualized approach to the implementation of assessment practices for those students who have diverse needs and participate in large-scale content assessments. This document focuses on universal tools, designated supports, and accommodations for the Smarter Balanced content assessments of English language arts/literacy and mathematics (math). At the same time, it supports important instructional decisions about accessibility and accommodations for students who participate in the Smarter Balanced assessments. It recognizes the critical connection between accessibility and accommodations in instruction and accessibility and accommodations during assessment. Professional development materials that support the Guidelines and this critical instruction-assessment link will be available in the Spring of 2014. The Guidelines also are supported by the Smarter Balanced Test Administration Manual.

Smarter Balanced Assessment Design

The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium has developed a system of valid, reliable, and fair next-generation assessments aligned to the CCSS in English language arts (ELA)/literacy and mathematics for grades 3-8 and 11. The system includes summative assessments for accountability purposes, optional interim assessments for local use, and formative tools and processes for instructional use. Computer adaptive testing technologies are used for the summative and interim assessments to provide meaningful feedback and actionable data that teachers and other stakeholders can use to help students succeed. For more information, visit www.smarterbalanced.org/smarter-balanced-assessments/.

Recognizing Access Needs in All Students

All students (including students with disabilities, ELLs, and ELLs with disabilities) are to be held to the same expectations for participation and performance on state assessments. Specifically, all students enrolled in grades 3-8 and 11 are required to participate in the Smarter Balanced mathematics assessment except:

- Students with the most significant cognitive disabilities who meet the criteria for the mathematics alternate assessment based on alternate achievement standards (approximately 1% or fewer of the student population).

All students enrolled in grades 3-8 and 11 are required to participate in the Smarter Balanced English language/literacy assessment except:

- Students with the most significant cognitive disabilities who meet the criteria for the English language/literacy alternate assessment based on alternate achievement standards (approximately 1% or fewer of the student population).
- ELLs who are enrolled for the first year in a U.S. school. These students instead participate in their state’s English language proficiency assessment.

Federal laws governing student participation in statewide assessments include the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) (reauthorized as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 – NCLB), the
Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA), and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (reauthorized in 2008).

Recognizing the diverse characteristics and needs of students who participate in the Smarter Balanced assessments, the Smarter Balanced states worked together through the Smarter Balanced Test Administration and Student Access Work Group to develop an Accessibility and Accommodations Framework that guided the consortium as it worked to reach agreement on the specific tools, supports, and accommodations available for the assessment. The Work Group also considered research-based lessons learned about universal design, accessibility tools, and accommodations (see Appendix B).

The conceptual model that serves as the basis for the Usability, Accessibility, and Accommodations Guidelines is shown in Figure 1. This figure portrays several aspects of the Smarter Balanced assessment features – universal tools (available for all students), designated supports (available when indicated by an adult or team), and accommodations (available need is documented in an Individualized Education Program – IEP or 504 plan). It also portrays the additive and sequentially-inclusive nature of these three aspects. Universal tools are available to all students, including those receiving designated supports and those receiving accommodations. Designated supports are available only to students for whom an adult or team has indicated the need for these accommodations (as well as those students for whom the need is documented). Accommodations are available only to those students with documentation of the need through a formal plan (i.e., IEP). Those students also may use designated supports and universal tools.

A universal tool for one content focus may be an accommodation for another content focus (see, for example, calculator). Similarly, a designated support may also be an accommodation, depending on the content target (see, for example, scribe). This approach is consistent with the emphasis that Smarter Balanced has placed on the validity of assessment results coupled with access. Universal tools, designated supports, and accommodations all yield valid scores that count as participation in statewide assessments when used in a manner consistent with the Guidelines.

Also, as shown in Figure 1, for each category of assessment features – universal tools, designated supports, and accommodations – there exist both embedded and non-embedded versions of the tools, supports, or accommodations depending on whether they are provided as digitally-delivered components of the test administration system or separate from it.
The Conceptual Model recognizes that all students should be held to the same expectations for instruction in CCSS and have available to them universal accessibility features. It also recognizes that some students may have certain characteristics and access needs that require the use of accommodations for instruction and when they participate in the Smarter Balanced assessments.

These Guidelines present the current universal tools, designated supports, and accommodations adopted by the Smarter Balanced states to ensure valid assessment results for all students taking its assessments.