

APPENDIX V – 37

V.G.1.g ACT Engage Memo

Memo

To: SLT
From: Amy Cislak, Michael Konrad, William Pearson,
cc: Juliet King, PhD, Martha Taylor
Date: June 19, 2016
Re: ACT Engage

Recommendation: The UHS USP Sub-Committee recommends the adoption of the ACT Engage assessment for the 2016-2017 admissions process to replace the current short-answer essay questions.

The ACT Engage Assessment

The short-answer essay questions were designed to identify student characteristics such as resiliency (ability to develop strategies to succeed academically, socially, and personally); self-appraisal (ability to recognize approaches are work and changing those that don't); and goal-orientation (directed towards college and career). They provided students an opportunity to express personal experiences outside of academics. The drawbacks of the assessment, however, were that the questions are not statistically well-defined (i.e. they are not necessarily valid nor reliable), and although scored by a group of external readers, open to subjectivity. In addition, they require students to articulate their ideas in writing. In consequence, the UHS admissions committee has sought alternative assessments.

As part of the 2015-2016 UHS Admissions process, students who took the short-answer essay questions completed the ACT Engage assessment to determine whether it could be adopted for the 2016-17 admissions process. A total of 35 valid assessments were completed from the 36 essayists. The decision to take this approach was based on the findings of the 2014-15 pilot which suggested that the ACT Engage would provide a reliable assessment of student personal and behavioral characteristics, complementing the existing admissions criteria.

The ACT Engage is a self-report inventory of over 100 items designed to measure students' attitudes towards learning, school and family engagement. It is a nationally normed assessment with studies assessing validity and reliability. ACT regularly re-evaluates its scales and predicted outcomes. Students complete the survey on-line within 40 minutes.

There are a total of 10 defined sub-scales that measure three domains – motivation/skills, self-regulation, and social engagement on the ACT assessment. Five sub-scales are of particular interest for UHS admissions because they assess similar characteristics as the short-answer essay questions.

ACT Engage Scale Definitions[^]

| Motivation/Skills | |
|--------------------------|---|
| Academic Discipline | Degree to which student is hard-working and conscientious. Students place value on academic work. |
| Commitment to School | Commitment to stay in school seen as a predictor of persistence for high school and post-secondary education |
| Optimism | A hopeful outlook about the future in spite of difficulties or challenges. Students with high optimism are more likely to persist through academic challenges and/or setbacks in their personal lives |
| Self-Regulation | |
| Managing Feelings | Tendency to manage duration and intensity of negative feelings and to find appropriate ways to express these feelings |
| Thinking Before Acting | Tendency to think about the consequences of one's actions |

[^]adapted from the ACT Engage Grades 6-9 Users Guide pg 38-41

The *Guide to Using Results* published by ACT identifies that scores at or above the 76th percentile or above are considered as student strengths. An analysis of the sub-scale scores at the student level shows that there is wide variation across the 35 students in their responses. For instance, percentile scores range from 8 to 99 on the Commitment to School sub-scale, or from 16 to 99 on the Thinking Before Acting sub-scale.

The following table shows the range and mean percentile score across each selected ACT Engage scale.

Mean Percentile scores across select ACT Engage Subscales for the 35 Essayists - 2015-16

| | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean |
|-----------------------------------|----|---------|---------|------|
| Academic Discipline Percentile | 35 | 15 | 99 | 70 |
| Commitment to School Percentile | 35 | 8 | 99 | 70 |
| Optimism Percentile | 35 | 7 | 99 | 60 |
| Managing Feelings Percentile | 35 | 19 | 99 | 78 |
| Thinking Before Acting Percentile | 35 | 16 | 99 | 72 |

Proposed Selection Criteria Using the ACT Engage

Using the criteria that a student must exhibit 3 out of the 5 scales on the ACT Engage as strengths provides a way of assessing how students fare compared to the results of the essay (whether a student was offered admission or not). The following table shows the distribution by ethnicity under each selection criteria.

**Students selected using ACT or Essay criteria by
Ethnicity**

| | All students | ACT | Essay |
|-------------------|--------------|-----|-------|
| White | 9 | 4 | 4 |
| AfricanAm | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Hispanic | 21 | 13 | 11 |
| Native Am | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Asian/OPI | 3 | 1 | 1 |
| Multi-race | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Total | 35 | 18 | 17 |

As shown, 18 students would have been selected, including two more Hispanic students using the ACT criteria rather than the essay. The population of the two groups however is not the same. Only 10 of the 17 essay students met the ACT criteria – the other 8 students included had essay response scores below the cut-off. As expected the ACT Engage picks up a slightly different group of students than the essay.

**Mean Percentile scores for Students who exhibited 3 of 5
strengths on the ACT Engage sub-scales compared to students
who did not**

| | N | Mean | N | Mean |
|-----------------------------------|----|------|----|------|
| Academic Discipline Percentile | 18 | 82 | 17 | 58 |
| Commitment to School Percentile | 18 | 84 | 17 | 56 |
| Optimism Percentile | 18 | 70 | 17 | 48 |
| Managing Feelings Percentile | 18 | 89 | 17 | 66 |
| Thinking Before Acting Percentile | 18 | 88 | 17 | 56 |

As the table above shows the mean percentile scores along the five sub-scales for students who met the ACT criteria and those that did not are significantly higher ($p < 0.05$). This means that the assessment will be able to better discriminate among students along these five dimensions.

Recommendation

Based on the following results, the UHS USP Sub-Committee proposes to replace the existing short-answer essay questions with the ACT Engage assessment. The ACT Engage is a national normed assessment designed to measure several of the characteristics that UHS has tried to include through the short-answer essay questions. As a formal assessment with validity and reliability studies, it adds the additional dimension to the existing UHS admissions process (the Cognitive Abilities Test and class grades) that the essay questions lack. In addition it is easy to administer and complete. Finally, it meets the USP obligation to include a "multiple measure" for its admission process.