

Balancing Rigor and Access: The Role of the Praxis Core

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Abstract: The Praxis Core Academic Skills for Educators Tests are widely used as admission requirements for educator preparation programs, intended to assess foundational readiness in reading, writing, and mathematics. Emerging research, however, indicates these assessments often function as gatekeeping mechanisms that restrict access without reliably predicting classroom effectiveness. This article examines the tension between accountability and access through a review of national literature and a focused case study of rural southeastern North Carolina. Findings highlight equity concerns, geographic and financial barriers, and the value of targeted institutional supports. The study argues for balancing rigor with equity to strengthen EPP enrollment nationally.

Keywords: Praxis, Tests, Accountability, Access

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The Praxis Core Academic Skills for Educators Tests, developed and administered by Educational Testing Service (ETS), is a standardized assessment commonly required for admission to EPPs in approximately 46 states and the District of Columbia (Which States Do Not Require Praxis?, n.d.). Like widely recognized college readiness exams like the SAT or ACT, the Praxis Core focuses on evaluating fundamental skills in reading, writing, and mathematics. In this role, it serves as a general indicator of whether prospective candidates possess the academic readiness needed for entry into educator preparation programs and for continued progress toward teacher licensure.

This paper examines the tension between accountability and access in teacher preparation (Wynter-Hoyte, et al., 2020). It also explores how the Praxis Core may function as a gatekeeping mechanism for some prospective candidates and to consider the role of targeted institutional supports in mitigating these effects (Wynter-Hoyte, et al., 2020). By examining these dynamics, the paper underscores the importance of balancing rigor with equity to strengthen EPP enrollment and support broader efforts to address ongoing teacher shortages (Van Cleef, 2022). While these issues are evident across the United States, this tension is further examined through the lens of rural North Carolina.

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Standardized Testing as a Systematic Barrier in Teacher Education: A Literature Review

The challenge facing modern teacher education is a fundamental misalignment between the rigorous "gatekeeping" of EPPs and the actual demands of the classroom. While EPPs are tasked with maintaining high standards to ensure teacher quality, a growing body of evidence suggests that current entrance criteria, specifically basic skills tests like the Praxis Core, serve as poor predictors of a candidate's future success (Beck, 2023; Wynter-Hoyte, et al., 2020).

The Failure of Predictive Validity and Skill Misalignment

Research highlights a stark lack of predictive validity in these assessments. For instance, a longitudinal study of 218 graduates over five years revealed no statistical correlation between admission test scores and the performance ratings candidates received during student-teaching evaluations (Borden-King et al., 2020). This finding aligns with broader meta-analyses indicating that basic skills tests generally fail to forecast classroom management skills or an individual's ability to facilitate student growth (Van Cleef, 2022; D'Agostino & Powers, 2009).

These data underscore a significant misalignment of skills. Many aspiring educators possess the deep content knowledge and clinical dispositions necessary for the job, yet they are blocked by the "artificial barrier" of standardized testing (Beck, 2023). This is particularly evident among veteran paraprofessionals who possess years of successful classroom experience but cannot clear the Praxis Core hurdle. Such cases suggest these exams measure "test-taking ability" rather than the nuanced instructional effectiveness required of a lead teacher (Beck, 2023).

Equity Concerns and the Diversity Gap

Beyond validity issues, the reliance on standardized testing raises profound questions about systemic equity. The "diversity gap" created by these assessments functions as a racial filter; 2025 data for the Praxis Core math section shows a White pass rate of 72%, compared to only 36% for African American and 56% for Hispanic candidates. Scholars argue this is the legacy of a system rooted in historical racism and eugenics, designed to preserve social hierarchies through a "monocultural foundation" (Beck, 2023).

In practice, standardized literacy assessments often reflect narrow assumptions about academic language use. When a single, formalized version of English is treated as the default benchmark, candidates whose linguistic backgrounds differ from that norm may be disadvantaged, even when they demonstrate strong pedagogical potential. Such misalignment between language expectations and actual teaching competence can unintentionally restrict access to educator preparation programs and limit progress toward building a teaching workforce that reflects the linguistic and cultural diversity of the communities schools serve (Schissel et al., 2025; Tandon et al., 2024).

Multi-Dimensional Barriers: Academic, Structural, and Financial

The challenges posed by the Praxis Core function as a multi-dimensional web of hurdles that often work in tandem:

Academic and Structural

Mathematics remains the most formidable hurdle, often requiring months of intensive tutoring. Because many EPPs require passing scores for formal admission, failing a single subtest can delay student-teaching for semesters or years, leading many to depart from their degree programs entirely (Borden-King et al., 2020).

Geographic

Rural candidates, particularly in areas like Southeastern North Carolina, face "testing deserts." Geographic isolation requires traveling long distances to access testing centers, creating a physical barrier that discourages local talent and forces districts to rely on residency pathways or international staff (Praxis Blog, 2026).

Financial

The cumulative cost is prohibitive; with exams costing \$130, registration fees reaching \$50, and prep materials exceeding \$50/month, the total investment can reach thousands of dollars for those requiring multiple attempts (Praxis Core: Barriers and Policy Shifts, 2026).

Psychological

The high stakes nature of the test contributes to cumulative stress and psychological strain among educators, particularly when assessment outcomes are tied to accountability measures and professional consequences. Sustained anxiety and diminished professional confidence are well documented predictors of teacher burnout and attrition, leading many talented individuals to leave the profession for unrelated careers, representing a significant loss of potential educators (Taie, S., & Lewis, L., 2023).

Policy Shifts and Holistic Assessment

In recent years, several states have reexamined the role of standardized testing in teacher licensure, with some adopting more flexible pathways that emphasize coursework, performance-based measures, and holistic indicators of readiness. These national conversations reflect growing concern about ongoing teacher shortages and elevated attrition rates, underscoring the need to balance academic rigor with equitable access to the profession.

Recognizing these tests as hurdles rather than quality benchmarks, several states have initiated policy re-evaluations. New Jersey eliminated the Praxis Core requirement in

early 2025, and Colorado removed specific subject requirements later that year to correct for economic and cultural biases (Rutgers Policy Lab, 2025).

The educational sector is also pivoting toward modernization and alternative assessments. A significant development is the Spring 2026 launch of "Praxis Steps" by ETS (Educational Testing Service, 2019), a modular format allowing candidates to retake individual content categories at their own pace with targeted diagnostic feedback. Simultaneously, EPPs are moving toward "multi-pronged internal assessments" that prioritize classroom observations and professional dispositions over a single test score (Borden-King et al., 2020). Scholars have argued that standardized admission and licensure requirements often function as barriers to entry rather than meaningful indicators of classroom readiness. Shifting toward performance based and developmental criteria reframes admissions as opportunities for growth and support, rather than mechanisms of exclusion (Van Cleef, 2022).

North Carolina Praxis Policy

While North Carolina has engaged in similar policy discussions, standardized testing remains a central licensure requirement. These national conversations reflect growing concern about ongoing teacher shortages and elevated attrition rates, underscoring the need to balance academic rigor with equitable access to the profession.

The teacher shortage in rural southeastern North Carolina encompassing districts such as Robeson, Columbus, and Bladen counties serves as a poignant case study of the tension between rigid academic gatekeeping and the urgent need for a stable educator pipeline. While EPPs are traditionally tasked with maintaining high standards, the application of these standards in economically distressed regions often inadvertently exacerbates local staffing crises.

For decades, districts in this region have navigated the "traditional" EPP pipeline's insufficiency by relying on international and residency pathways. In Robeson County alone, schools have historically utilized over 150 international teachers, on J-1 visas, to fill core vacancies (NCSBE, 2023-2024). However, as of 2026, shifting federal visa policies and skyrocketing sponsorship costs often exceeding \$20,000 per teacher have rendered this "stop-gap" solution unsustainable. This shift has placed immense pressure on local EPPs to produce domestic candidates who are deeply rooted in the community.

The central friction point in this domestic pipeline is the failure of predictive validity associated with the Praxis Core. Research consistently indicates that these scores do not accurately forecast classroom effectiveness. A 2025 analysis by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI, 2025) found that candidates who entered the profession via residency routes many of whom bypassed the Praxis Core during COVID-19 waiver periods performed just as well as their traditionally licensed counterparts. These educators were equally likely to receive "proficient" or higher evaluation ratings and meet critical student growth targets (NCDPI, 2025).

The teacher preparation pipeline in rural southeastern North Carolina is further strained by geographic and structural challenges common to rural contexts. Candidates in these areas often face limited access to testing centers and fewer local academic support resources compared to urban regions such as Raleigh or Charlotte. Faculty and advisors report that paraprofessionals and school staff many from Black and Indigenous communities

frequently demonstrate strong instructional skills yet encounter difficulty with the Praxis Core, particularly in mathematics. This pattern suggests a potential misalignment between standardized testing requirements and the instructional competencies needed to serve rural students effectively (Educational Testing Service [ETS], 2019).

Description of UNCP Program and Students

UNCP's location in rural southeastern North Carolina fosters strong partnerships with local schools and communities, providing EPP candidates with meaningful clinical experiences. Founded in 1887 as the first state supported institution for American Indians, UNCP continues to serve a highly diverse student population. This diversity enriches the EPP, offering candidates opportunities to learn, teach, and lead in culturally responsive ways. Across the university, more than half of the student body identifies as a racial or ethnic minority, and 70% of all UNCP students are First Generation college students. This diversity is reflected within the EPP, where candidates benefit from small class sizes, a student faculty ratio of 18:1, and personalized support that strengthens their academic and professional growth.

During the fall semester, 1,194 students were enrolled in EPP programs across undergraduate, graduate, residency, and licensure only pathways. Students can pursue a wide range of educator preparation options, including:

- Undergraduate teacher preparation programs
- Master's degree initial licensure programs in 14 areas of specialization
- School Counseling, School Administration, and School Social Work programs
- Add-on licensure areas that support professional advancement

Through its mission, programs, and partnerships, the UNCP EPP prepares graduates who are ready to serve as effective teachers, leaders, and advocates in schools across North Carolina and beyond.

Preparation for the Praxis Core

A key strength of the EPP at UNCP is the intentional academic support provided to students preparing for the Praxis Core assessment. The Praxis Core office leads this effort by offering targeted preparation designed to help candidates, many of whom are first generation or returning adult learners to successfully meet state admissions requirements. Through diagnostic assessments, individualized study plans, small group tutoring, and access to practice materials, the office ensures that students receive the guidance they need to build confidence and strengthen essential academic skills.

This support model is proactive and student-centered. Faculty and advisors work closely with this office to identify students early and connect them with workshops, one-on-one coaching, and ongoing progress monitoring. These efforts not only improve test performance but also reduce anxiety and increase students' sense of readiness as they approach this important milestone. By embedding Praxis Core preparation within a broader culture of academic care, the EPP ensures that the assessment serves as a pathway not a barrier to program admission. This comprehensive support system advances student success and reinforces the program's commitment to preparing a diverse, well-equipped, and confident future teacher workforce.

Supports and Solutions

To address barriers associated with the Praxis Core, the EPP has implemented a series of intentional, structured supports designed to promote candidate success while maintaining program rigor. These efforts reflect a commitment to reducing access barriers and strengthening the educator pipeline, particularly for nontraditional and high-need student populations.

Advising and Early Intervention

Academic advisors have first conversations with students about Praxis Core expectations during advising meetings. Information about Praxis Core as one of the requirements for admission to the EPP is shared in advising meetings. This information is also included on students' program checklists which are updated regularly during advising meetings. Faculty work to support students in their efforts making them aware early on that the Praxis Core is a requirement for admission, and that preparation is essential for success.

Embedded Supports

One key strategy includes embedding structured Praxis Core preparation across multiple courses within the program. While the Introduction to Education course incorporates required assignments that utilize 240 Tutoring (<https://www.240tutoring.com/>) as a guided support tool, faculty have extended these supports beyond a single entry-level course. This approach ensures that students engage with targeted practice in reading, writing, and mathematics early in their program while also reinforcing these skills throughout their coursework. Recognizing that many transfer students complete the Introduction to Education course at other institutions, faculty have been intentional in integrating Praxis Core preparation into courses that do not transfer into the program. This ensures that all students, regardless of entry pathway, have access to consistent, embedded support and opportunities to build familiarity with the format and expectations of the assessment.

In addition to course-embedded supports, the EPP developed Praxis Plus, an initiative designed to provide individualized assistance. Praxis Plus offers one-on-one tutoring based on personalized study plans aligned to candidate needs. The program also includes a financial incentive component, where students may receive test fee reimbursement upon completion of a designated number of tutoring sessions. This structure not only supports academic preparation but also addresses financial barriers that may otherwise hinder persistence.

Praxis Core Liaison

To further expand access to support, the EPP has established a dedicated liaison role responsible for coordinating structured tutoring sessions. These sessions are designed to be responsive to student needs and provide additional academic support outside of the

classroom. Recent efforts have focused on targeted support for specific student populations, including Teacher Assistant to Teacher (TA to Teacher) cohorts and Birth–Kindergarten (BK) candidates. These groups often consist of working adults balancing full-time employment, academic responsibilities, and family obligations. By offering flexible, cohort-based tutoring opportunities, the program increases accessibility and ensures that support systems align with the realities of candidates’ lived experiences.

Curriculum Revisions

In addition to these programmatic supports, recent curriculum revisions have addressed structural barriers related to the timing of the Praxis Core requirement. Previously, students were required to complete the Praxis Core prior to admission into EPP coursework. Updated program requirements now delay this expectation until the beginning of the first semester of the senior year, providing candidates with additional time to develop the necessary skills and engage in targeted preparation. This shift reflects a more developmentally appropriate approach that aligns assessment expectations with candidate readiness, while also reducing premature barriers that may hinder progression through the program.

These initiatives demonstrate how EPPs can implement strategic, multi-level supports to mitigate barriers associated with the Praxis Core. By embedding preparation within coursework, providing individualized and financial supports, restructuring program requirements, and tailoring interventions to specific student populations, programs can maintain high expectations while promoting equitable access and candidate success.

Dual Role of Praxis Core

The Praxis Core assessment plays a dual role in educator preparation, serving as both a measure of foundational academic skills and a structural barrier to entry into EPPs. Although designed to assess readiness in reading, writing, and mathematics, evidence from UNCP and the broader literature raises questions about its ability to predict classroom effectiveness or success in clinical practice. (Borden King et al., 2020; Public School Forum of North Carolina [PSFNC], 2023). During the COVID 19 testing waiver period, EPP enrollment increased including notable gains among Black and Hispanic candidates without corresponding declines in teacher performance or student outcomes (PSFNC, 2023; North Carolina Association of Colleges for Teacher Education [NCACTE], 2025). These patterns suggest that heavy reliance on standardized testing may be misaligned with the competencies most essential for effective teaching and may unnecessarily constrain the educator pipeline.

These patterns intersect with broader equity and access concerns. Praxis Core outcomes, particularly in mathematics and writing, disproportionately affect candidates from rural, first generation, and low wealth backgrounds, as well as Black, Indigenous and Hispanic candidates (Public School Forum of North Carolina [PSFNC], 2023). In southeastern North Carolina, academic challenges are compounded by geographic isolation, financial burden, and test related anxiety, contributing to attrition (Educational Testing Service [ETS], 2019). As a result, local districts continue to rely on unsustainable staffing solutions such as international hiring and residency licensure pathways rather

than cultivating a stable, community-based educator workforce (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction [NCDPI], 2025).

Program Recommendations for EPPs

EPPs should adopt a proactive, developmental approach to Praxis Core preparation by embedding structured support across the curriculum rather than isolating it within a single introductory course. Integrating targeted reading, writing, and mathematics skill development into multiple required courses ensures that all candidates, including transfer students, have sustained access to preparation. Programs should also expand the use of diagnostic tools and individualized learning plans, allowing faculty to identify and address specific skill gaps early in a candidate's progression.

In addition, EPPs should continue to implement and scale high-impact supports such as structured tutoring programs, cohort-based study groups, and required engagement with preparation platforms (e.g., 240 Tutoring <https://www.240tutoring.com/>). These supports should be aligned with course assignments and assessment expectations to reinforce skill development in authentic, applied contexts. Finally, EPPs should monitor disaggregated Praxis data to identify patterns across subgroups and adjust supports accordingly, ensuring that interventions are responsive to equity gaps.

Instructional and Advising Recommendations for Faculty

Faculty play a critical role in reframing the Praxis Core from a high-stakes barrier to a component of professional growth. This includes explicitly teaching test-aligned skills, particularly in writing, where rubric interpretation and response structure may impede otherwise capable candidates. Embedding practice opportunities that mirror Praxis expectations within coursework can help demystify the assessment and build candidate confidence.

Faculty should also engage in transparent and consistent advising conversations that clearly communicate expectations, timelines, and available supports. Early and ongoing communication helps reduce uncertainty and allows candidates to plan strategically for test completion. Additionally, faculty can incorporate formative assessments that provide feedback aligned with Praxis scoring criteria, particularly in writing, to bridge the gap between general academic performance and test-specific demands.

Institutional Strategies to Reduce Structural Barriers

At the institutional level, greater coordination is needed to reduce logistical and financial barriers associated with the Praxis Core. Institutions should consider expanding financial support mechanisms, such as test fee vouchers, reimbursement programs, or subsidized preparation of resources, particularly for candidates from low-wealth backgrounds.

Institutions should also invest in centralized support structures, including dedicated personnel or offices that coordinate tutoring, track candidate progress, and provide targeted outreach to students at risk of not meeting testing benchmarks. Strengthening data systems to track Praxis performance longitudinally can further support data-informed decision making and program improvement.

Importantly, institutions should examine internal policies related to admissions and progression to ensure flexibility where appropriate. For example, allowing conditional admission or delayed enforcement of Praxis requirements, such as moving the requirement to the pre-internship phase, can provide candidates with additional time and support without compromising program quality.

Policy Considerations for Expanding Access to EPPs

At the policy level, there is a need to reconsider the role of the Praxis Core as a singular, high-stakes gatekeeping mechanism for entry into EPPs. Policymakers should explore more flexible and holistic approaches to assessing candidate readiness, including multiple measures such as GPA, coursework performance, and faculty recommendations. Additionally, continued evaluation of testing policies implemented during the COVID-19 waiver period is warranted, particularly given evidence that increased access did not negatively impact teacher effectiveness or student outcomes. These findings suggest that alternative pathways to admission may expand the educator pipeline without diminishing quality.

Finally, targeted policy support for rural and high-need regions is essential. This may include increased funding for educator preparation programs, financial incentives for candidates pursuing teaching in these areas, and expanded access to academic and testing supports that address the unique structural and geographic barriers faced by candidates in these communities.

Reframing the Praxis Core as part of a developmental process rather than a fixed gatekeeping measure is essential. A more equitable and responsive approach to assessment will better support candidate success and contribute to a stronger, more diverse educator workforce.

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