

Melissa Lee Gholson

Research Project Director

EXPERTISE

Dr. Melissa Lee Gholson is a Research Project Director at Accessible Teaching, Learning, and Assessment Systems (ATLAS) at the University of Kansas, specializing in assessment design for students with significant cognitive disabilities and multilingual learners. She leads research teams on large-scale assessment and research and development initiatives, advancing evidence-centered and universally designed assessments that emphasize accessibility, equity, and technical quality. Her work spans conceptual and operational assessment design, cognitive labs, validity and fairness studies, and large-scale program evaluations.

Dr. Gholson has an extensive publication and presentation record on topics including culturally responsive and accessible assessment, alternate assessments and English language proficiency assessments, fairness in testing, and validity. Nationally, she is frequently invited as an expert on assessment policy, peer review, and inclusive design for special populations. She holds a doctorate in Educational Leadership & Research from Ohio University, an M.A. in Special Education from Marshall University, and a B.A. in Elementary and Early Childhood Education. She is a long-standing member of the National Council on Measurement in Education and the American Educational Research Association.

EXPERIENCE

Research Project Director	2023–Present
Accessible Teaching, Learning, and Assessment Systems (ATLAS), University of Kansas	
Research Scientist	2018–2023
Research and Measurement Sciences Educational Testing Service, Princeton, NJ	
Educational Researcher	2017–2018
Wisconsin Center for Education Research University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI	
State Assessment Coordinator	2009–2017
Office of Assessment, Accountability & Research WVDE, Charleston, WV	
Supervisor of Federal Programs	2004-2009
Cabell County Schools	
Assistant Professor	2002-2005
Educational Studies, Ohio University Athens, OH	
Special Education Teacher	1990-2004
Mingo County Schools, Williamson, WV	

EDUCATION

Ed.D. Education Leadership	2015
Ohio University	
M.A. Special Education	1992

PUBLICATIONS

Journal Articles

- Gholson, M. L., Sova, L., Hauck, M. C., Howley, L., & Albee, A. T. (2024). Extending principles of evidence-centered design for diverse populations: K–12 English learners with the most significant cognitive disabilities. *Educational Assessment*, 29(3), 206–228.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10627197.2024.2354297>
- Buzick, H. M., Casabianca-Marshall J. M., & Gholson, M. (2023). Personalizing large-scale assessment in practice. *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice*.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/emip.12551>
- Walker, M. E., Olivera-Aguilar, M., Lehman, B., Laitusis, C., Guzman-Orth, D., & Gholson, M. (2023). Culturally responsive assessment: Provisional principles. *ETS Research Report Series*, 2023(1), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ets2.12374>
- Wylie E. C. & Gholson, M. L. (2023). *U.S. federal assessment policy reforms in the twenty first century and their impacts* (4th ed.). The International Encyclopedia of Education, ScienceDirect.
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/referencework/9780128186299/international-encyclopedia-of-education>
- Gholson, M. L., & Guzman-Orth, D. (2019). *Developing an alternate English language proficiency assessment (AELPA) system: A theory of action* (Research Report No. RR-19–25). Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ets2.12262>
- Saal, L. K., Gholson, M., Machtmes, K., & Machtmes, R. (2018, November). *Associations between adults' numeracy skills and employment status: An analysis of PIAAC's U.S. dataset*. Washington, DC. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.24835.86569>
- Shyyan, V. V., Gholson, M. L., & Christensen, L. L. (2018, June). *Considerations for educators serving English learners with significant cognitive disabilities* (ALTELLA Brief No. 2). University of Wisconsin–Madison, Wisconsin Center for Education Research, Alternate English Language Learning Assessment project.
<http://altella.wceruw.org/resources.html>
- Christensen, L. L., Gholson, M. L., & Shyyan, V. V. (2018, April). *Establishing a definition of English learners with significant cognitive disabilities* (ALTELLA Brief No. 1). University of Wisconsin–Madison, Wisconsin Center for Education Research, Alternate English Language Learning Assessment project. <http://altella.wceruw.org/resources.html>
- Howley, A., Pendarvis, E., & Gholson, M. (2005). How talented students in a rural school district experience school mathematics. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 29(2), 123–160. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016235320502900202>

Technical Reports, White Papers, and Other Non-Peer Reviewed Publications

- Educational Testing Service. (2020). *Final report for the alternate English language proficiency assessments for California pilot using cognitive lab methodology study*. Sacramento, CA: California Department of Education [PI: Gholson, M.].
<https://www.cde.ca.gov/be/pn/im/infomemodec2020.asp>
- Educational Testing Service. (2019). *Proposed high-level test design for the Alternate English Language Proficiency Assessments for California*. Sacramento, CA: California Department of Education.
<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/ep/documents/proposedhltaldaltelpac.pdf>

- Gholson, M. (2015). *Rural Principal Attitudes toward Poverty and the Poor* [Doctoral dissertation, Ohio University]. OhioLINK Electronic Theses and Dissertations Center. https://etd.ohiolink.edu/acprod/odb_etd/etd/r/1501/10?clear=10&p10_accession_num=ohiou1448893928
- Michaels, H. R., Gholson, M. L., & Sheinker, J. (2018, September). ALTELLA standards prioritization process evaluation. Alexandria, VA: Human Resources Research Organization. University of Wisconsin—Madison, Wisconsin Center for Education research, Alternate English Language Learning Assessment Project. <https://altella.wceruw.org/resources.html>
- Gholson, M. (2016, 2015, 2014, 2013, 2012). *West Virginia guidelines for participation in state assessments: Guidance on accommodations for students with disabilities and/or limited English proficiency in state and district-wide testing*. Charleston: West Virginia Department of Education, Office of Assessment, Research and Accountability.

PRESENTATIONS

- Gholson, M., Laitusis, C., Burton, K. & Gooley, T. (2025, June 24). *Bridging Accessibility Gaps: Connecting the Dots Between Paper Based and Technology Based Alternate Assessments*. [Conference session]. Council of Chief State School Officers' 2026 National Conference on Student Assessment, Austin, TX, United States.
- Gholson, M., Karvonen, M., Kao, J., Keum, E., Christensen, L., Spangler, B. & Davidson, A., (2026, April 9). *Validity and Consequential Evidence: Moving Measurement Forward for Alternate Assessments*. [Conference session]. Annual Meeting of National Council of Measurement in Education (NCME), Los Angeles, CA, United States.
- Gholson, M. (2026, April 16). *Bridging the gap using Dynamic Learning Maps; Building a future and empowering every student*. [Invited speaker]. Tennessee Statewide Secondary Transition Academy
- Karvonen, M. & Gholson, M. (2026, March 13). *Moving the needle: Changing Postsecondary Readiness for students with extensive support needs*. [Conference session]. Annual Meeting for the Council of Exceptional Children. Salt Lake, UT.
- Gholson, M. (2025, April 25). *Methods for designing inclusive assessments* [Paper presentation]. Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), Inclusion and Accessibility for Education Assessment, Denver, CO, United States.
- Gholson, M., Laitusis, C., & Sato, E. (2025, June 25). *Reimagining K–2 reading assessments for accessibility, fairness and technical quality* [Paper presentation]. Council of Chief State School Officers' 2025 National Conference on Student Assessment, Denver, CO, United States.
- Gholson, M., Laitusis, C., Davidson, A., Karvonen, M., Ketterlin Geller, L., & Faulkner-Bond, M. (2024, April 13). *Equity by design: New models for the implementation of universal design* [Conference session]. Annual Meeting of National Council of Measurement in Education (NCME), San Francisco, CA, United States.
- Gholson, M., Jaquith, J., Sova, L., Albee, T., Adkins, D., & Clark, A. (2023, June 25). *Designing early childhood assessments: Improving student learning for all in grades K–2* [Conference session]. Council of Chief State School Officers' 2023 National Conference on Student Assessment, New Orleans, LA, United States.
- Gholson, M. (2022, April 23). *Conceptualizations of fairness: An examination of assessment design*. In: Broken systems of assessment: Addressing fairness and equity challenges

- in special populations. [Invited speaker] Annual Meeting of National Council of Measurement in Education (NCME), San Diego, CA, United States.
- Cizek, G., Gholson, M., Garcia, E., & Shultz, P. K. (2022, April 23). *Conceptualizations of fairness: An examination of assessment design*. [Invited speaker] In: Broken systems of assessment: Addressing fairness and equity challenges in special populations. Annual Meeting of National Council of Measurement in Education (NCME).
- Gholson, M. (2022, April 25). *Reimagining accommodations: A review of the literature and future considerations for text to speech* [Paper presentation]. Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) Special Education SIG.
- Gholson, M., Howley, L., & Albee, T. (2022). *Research to improve educational outcomes: The Alternate ELPAC survey results* [Paper presentation]. Annual meeting of the California Educational Research Association (CERA), Anaheim, CA, United States.
- Gholson, M., Karvonen, M., Bacher, K., Winter, P., Sato, E., & Marion, S. (2021, June 22). *Advances in validity evidence for alternate assessments* [Conference session]. Council of Chief State School Officers' 2021 National Conference on Student Assessment.
- Gholson, M. (2021, July 30). *Methods for improving cognitive labs using purposeful sampling procedures*. CCSSO Students with Disabilities Task Force.
- Gholson, M., Thacker, A., & Winter, P. (2021). *Deep dive into critical elements 2.1 & 3.1*. [Invited speaker]. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. <https://oese.ed.gov/files/2021/08/Webinar-3-Assessment-Peer-Review-8.12.21.pdf>
- Gholson, M., Vergas, V., & Warkomski, F. (2021). *Deep dive into critical elements 5.4 & 6.4*. [Invited speaker]. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. <https://oese.ed.gov/files/2021/08/Webinar-PPT-slides-PDF.pdf>
- Gholson, M. (2020, September 10). *Improving fairness: Theories of action and intentional design methods*. [Paper session]. National Council for Measurement in Education Conference.
- Gholson, M. (2020, September 9). *Beyond accommodations: Intentional design methods for improving validity when assessing diverse populations*. [Paper session] National Council for Measurement in Education Conference. Virtual.
- Gholson, M., Davidson, A., Karvonen, M., & Spitz, D. (2020, June 15). *Fifty years of fairness: Reflections on past, present and future directions for supporting fair and equitable state assessments* [Conference session]. Council of Chief State School Officers' 2020 National Conference on Student Assessment, Denver, CO, United States.
- Karvonen, M., Gholson, M., Clark, A., & Wiegert, S. (2019, June 26). *Measuring college and career readiness: How do we know if our alternate academic achievement standards are challenging and aligned?* [Conference session]. Council of Chief State School Officers' 2019 National Conference on Student Assessment, Orlando, FL.
- Gholson, M., & Saal, L. K. (2018). *Associations between adults' numeracy skills and employment status: An analysis of PIAAC's U.S. dataset. Do U.S. adults have the skills needed to thrive in the 21st century?* [Invited speaker]. AIR PIAAC Research to Practice Conference, Arlington, VA, December 6, 2018.
- Gholson, M., Saal, L., & Hertz, K. (2019, April 1). *Unmasking barriers to adult employment: WIOA, PIAAC Numeracy Skills, and Implications for the Field*. [Paper session]. Annual Conference of the Coalition on Adult Basic Education (COABE). New Orleans, LA.
- Gholson, M. (2018). *State assessment peer review seminar: Session B-2 alternate ELP achievement standards; Session C-1 state critical elements: Inclusion*. [Invited

speaker]. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. <https://apps1.seiservices.com/oss-sapr/Materials.aspx>

Gholson, M. (2018, January 31). *English learners with significant cognitive disabilities: Observations and interviews* [Invited speaker]. CCSSO Students with Disabilities Advisory Task Force Meeting, Dallas, TX, United States.

Gholson, M. (2018, February 21). *Instructional strategies/Considerations for English learners with significant cognitive disabilities* [Invited speaker]. CCSSO ASES SCASS Winter Meeting, Miami, FL, United States.

Gholson, M., & Lyon, C. (2018, October 9). *A logic model: Informing a theory of action for alternate English language proficiency assessments* [Invited speaker]. CCSSO Assessing Special Education Students (ASES) Fall Meeting, Boston, MA, United States.

FUNDED PROJECTS

Gholson, M. (2022). ETS External Contract [\$388,000]. Design interim alternate assessment.

Gholson, M. & Guzman-Orth. (2022). *NAEP Survey Assessments Innovation Lab (SAIL) Reimagining Fairness: NAEP Accessibility Explorations* [\$280,000.00].

Rikoon, S. & Gholson, M. (2022). *Special Olympics International Program Evaluation* [\$500,000.00].

Saal, L. K., Gholson, M., Machtmes, R., & Machtmes, K. (2018). (PIs) American Institutes of Research (AIR), PIAAC Research Funding, *Associations between adults' numeracy skills and employment status: An analysis of PIAAC's U.S. dataset*. December 1, 2016 [\$10,000.00].

AWARDS

ETS Presidential Award	2022
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Leading the design and development of the California Alternate ELPAC Summative ELP Assessment.

Invited Researcher to the Institute of Educational Sciences (IES)	2019
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Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC): *Associations between adults' numeracy skills and employment status: An analysis of PIAAC's U.S. dataset*.

AERA Early Career Award	2018
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Adult Literacy and Adult Education Dream Deferred? Equity, Employment, & Adults' Literacy Skills: An Analysis of the U.S. PIAAC Dataset.

PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES

Journal Reviewer

<i>Language Assessment Quarterly</i> , Taylor & Francis	2025–2026
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Lead State Assessment Peer Reviewer

Office of Elementary & Secondary Education, USDE	2015–2026
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National Council for Measurement in Education (NCME)

Chair, Fairness in Testing	2018–2019
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American Education for Research (AERA)

Program Chair, Inclusion & Accessibility SIG	2016–2019
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Research Advisor

Instructional Technology for All Ohioians Project, University of Cincinnati	2024–2025
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PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

National Council of Measurement in Education

American Educational Research Association