The aswb social work licensing examinations: fact and fiction

Donna DeAngelis, LICSW, ACSW
Executive Director, ASWB
Who we are

Association of Social Work Boards

Regulatory boards – 49 states, DC, USVI, all Canadian provinces

Board action databank, CE provider approval, model law, communication, education, and...
The ASWB Social Work Licensing Examinations

- Over 32,000 exams in 2011
- Computer delivered exams
- Over 220 Pearson VUE testing sites in North America
- 52 weeks a year
- North American scope
- Four-option multiple choice
- 170 items (questions) – 150 scored; 20 pretest
- Items are randomly administered to candidates
- 4 hour limit
- Multiple forms on-line
- Set passing score
The ASWB Social Work Licensing Examinations

Exam Categories
Associate – non social work-degreed applicants for paraprofessional social work licenses (only a few jurisdictions)

Bachelors – appropriate for BSWs with 0-2 years of experience

Masters – appropriate for MSWs with 0-2 years of experience

Advanced Generalist – appropriate for MSWs with 2-5 years of experience in non-clinical settings

Clinical – appropriate for MSWs with 2-5 years of experience in clinical settings
Why this presentation?

The licensing exams can prevent someone from pursuing their chosen career.

Not everyone passes them.

Naturally, opinions abound.

Facts are also involved.

“To be positive: to be mistaken at the top of one's voice.”
-Ambrose Bierce
Today

- The purpose of licensure tests
- How the tests are built
- What the tests measure
- How the tests measure it
- What the results mean – and what they don’t
- The ASWB exams and the social work community
The purpose of licensure testing: Fiction

- To make money
- To protect turf
- To restrict trade
- To guarantee excellence
The purpose of licensure testing reality

Objective way of establishing **MINIMAL COMPETENCE** to practice safely

**Focused on the line** between those with and without this minimal competence; does not determine excellence

Focused on knowledge, skills, and abilities relevant to **protection of the public**

One of **several components** in a licensure decision
How the tests are built

A committee chooses content

It’s biased toward a particular modality

It’s all clinical

They use old course syllabi

FICTION
The examinations are the result of a long process

Starts with a **practice analysis** conducted every 7 years

**Survey of current social work practice**

**Relates to minimum knowledge and skills**

necessary to perform social work safely at various educational and experience levels

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**In 2009, of 16,040 surveys distributed:**

- **Surveys sent:**
  - 4,031 Canada
  - 12,009 U.S.

- **Usable response rate:**
  - 39.3% Canada
  - 40.1% U.S.

U.S. and Canadian responses substantially similar, allowing for creation of single North American examinations
How the tests are built

**real**ity

The examinations follow strict guidelines

**Blueprints** (what will be measured on the exam) are **built based on practice analysis results**

**KSAs** are identified and **weighting of content areas is determined**

**Number of items** in each content area **is determined** based on weighting decision

Psychometricians **assemble the blueprint**

**ASWB** subject matter experts **review the blueprint**

**Valid tests must meet standards**

**Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing, 1999**

**Equal Employment Opportunity Commission Guidelines**
Experience and psychometric expertise of Pearson VUE, our contract partner for the examinations
How the tests are built

**reality**

The individual questions must meet standards

**Readability** is emphasized: simple sentences, direct questions whenever possible, ambiguous words or words with double meanings eliminated when possible.

**Criticality** is a requirement. Item must be testing knowledge critical to safe practice—no trivia.

Items must adhere to **KSAs in blueprint**

**All items must be pretested** before they can be used as a scored question on an examination.

Test development resources available to you, www.aswb.org:

**ASWB Practice Analysis**
Full text and supporting documentation on the study of practice completed in 2009

**Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities Statements**
Complete listing of the discrete content statements used by writers to create test questions
What the test measures

- Nothing
- Test taking ability
- Values of the dominant culture
- Reading ability

**FICTION**
What the test measures reality

The examinations measure minimum competence

Test reflects **widely accepted practice**
(not specific to geographic, cultural, or other settings)

Test measures knowledge **applicable across practice areas**
(not knowledge of hospital social work, school social work, geriatric social work per se)

Every question has **one single correct answer**, verified through the **pretest** process - test does not rely on tricks, deception, purposeful confusion

**North American pass rates, 2011:**

- Bachelors 78%
- Masters 83%
- Adv. Gen. 48%
- Clinical 78%
How the test measures it

- Must pass all sections
- Scores improve through retakes
- Scored on a curve
- Passing score is 70%
The ASWB examinations have a North American passing score, the same in all jurisdictions.

**Anchor exams** establish passing standard; individual forms **equated** so ensure that overall difficulty remains consistent.

Score requirements ("70" or "75") **are not percentages required**. Actual ("raw") **scores are scaled** to reflect system used—not easier to pass one place than another.

Item development process and pretesting results in **highly reliable test questions** (decision consistency avg. 94%).

Equating accounts for variations in individual item difficulty; adjusts raw passing score up or down (slightly) to keep overall difficulty consistent.

The "70" / "75" requirements are analogous to km vs. mi—2 ways of describing the same distance.
Examination results can only be viewed in the context of their intent and construction.

The whole is what matters. Test-takers are not required to achieve minimum scores in individual content areas.

The test is about practice, not curriculum. The test measures practice competence. Social work degrees prepare students to become members of a profession.

The examinations measure minimum competence necessary for safe practice. They do not measure excellence.
The ASWB examinations and the social work community

What’s the relationship to EPAS?

How can we collaborate?

Should we be teaching differently?

How can we improve pass rates?
The ASWB examinations and the social work community

Collaboration, influence, impact

ASWB outreach to educators:

- Consultation with individual programs
- Participation in CSWE Commission on Educational Policy, CSWE Social Work Roundtable
- Presentations at BPD, CSWE, NADD, etc.
The ASWB examinations and the social work community

Collaboration, influence, impact

Improving performance

1. Establish the basic tools needed

**Reading skills** – ASWB exams written at 10th grade level (not counting social work terms)

**Critical thinking skills** – ASWB exams contain questions that require problem-solving and reasoning ability

**Anxiety management** – the reality is that ASWB exams are high-stakes tests
Collaboration, influence, impact
Improving performance

2. Encourage a thorough (and accurate) understanding of the test. www.aswb.org

Test construction—familiarity with test blueprint, KSAs, basic purpose of test (minimal competence, public protection)

Item construction—familiarity with four-option multiple choice format; particularly use of QUALIFYING words (“FIRST,” “BEST,” “MOST,” etc.)

Administration details—test centers, time limits, candidate rules, etc.
The ASWB examinations and the social work community

Collaboration, influence, impact
Improving performance

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Volunteer social workers, staff, and consultants work to be sure test questions are fair. **Diverse groups of social workers:**

- Write the questions
- Edit the questions
- Take the exams and are included in pretest statistics
- Review questions that have statistics indicating bias, more than one possible answer, or other problems
The ASWB examinations and the social work community

Collaboration, influence, impact

How the process works

Get involved – apply to become an item writer

Call for applications for 2013 will be made in fall 2012.
Collaboration, influence, impact
Improving performance

3. Explore resources

**ASWB group practice exam** – complete, 170 question practice test, with rationales, intended for classroom use

**ASWB study guides** – hardcopy booklet containing construction information, references, sample questions and rationales

**ASWB practice test** – (for registered candidates only) Full-scale test with 30-day access and four-hour time limit, “look and feel” of actual test software
Collaboration, influence, impact
Improving performance

4. Ask questions, join the conversation

Email – email us directly: info@aswb.org

Online community – ASWB on Facebook; ASWB on Twitter (@ASWB)
Thanks for listening.

Questions? Comments?