



Social workers as architects

After a two-year analysis of social work practice, ASWB releases its findings and announces new exam blueprints that will take effect January 2, 2018

Over the years at ASWB, many analogies have been used to explain the mysterious yet matter-of-fact process of developing the high-stakes social work licensing examinations: concocting a witch's brew, piecing a jigsaw puzzle together, drawing blueprints. The final analogy has stuck. When talking about exam content, the term *blueprints* is most frequently used at ASWB—and in the professional testing industry—to describe the

outlines comprising the knowledge, skills, and abilities statements (or KSAs) that are the underpinnings of exam questions and reflect the essential elements of minimum competency for the occupation being assessed. Beginning January 2, 2018, ASWB exams will be defined by new blueprints following the sixth and latest practice analysis.

The content of the 2018 blueprints is being released now—concurrent with the release of the *2017 Analysis of the Practice of Social Work*, also called the technical report—to give exam candidates time to acclimate to the changes as they prepare for a career making-or-breaking examination. The good news: “The changes are relatively minor,” said Lavina Harless, ASWB exam development director. “What candidates will find are average adjustments of one to two percent among various content areas. The majority of the changes have to do with reorganization of content areas, along with an attempt to create greater uniformity on content terminology across the Bachelors, Masters, Advanced Generalist, and Clinical exam categories. While each of these exams tests different parameters of social work knowledge and skills, the tests now share a similar set of descriptive terms describing content.”



Greg Winkler (WI) and Bynia Reed (MD), item development consultants, participated in the reclassification task, where live test questions were assigned to the 2018 blueprint content areas.

Blueprints: More consistency than change

The Bachelors, Masters, and Clinical exam category blueprints retained four content areas each, and changes include predominantly minor structural and editorial modifications for comprehensiveness and currency. For example, in the Bachelors and Masters blueprints, “the content area of Direct and Indirect Practice was renamed Interventions with Clients/Client Systems to more accurately reflect the practice of social work with diverse clients and client systems,” said Harless.

The Advanced Generalist exam blueprint had the most extensive changes, being restructured from five content areas to four. As a result, overlapping or redundant competencies were eliminated and the total number of competencies being tested in the Advanced Generalist exam was reduced from 28 to 14.

One change that was consistent across all exam categories: an increased emphasis on professional values and ethics, indicating the importance of demonstrating competence in this content area for safe and effective practice.

A [complete listing](#) of all four content outlines with competencies and KSAs is available.

Technical report: A detailed look at process and outcomes

The [technical report](#) describes the process used by ASWB to conduct the practice analysis survey, the methodology, and the outcomes that were used to update the exam blueprints maintained by ASWB. The report contains the full practice analysis surveys and background

questionnaires in English and Canadian French as well as the results of the surveys and the data analysis conducted by Human Resources Research Organization (HumRRO), the psychometric consulting firm that partnered with ASWB in this process.

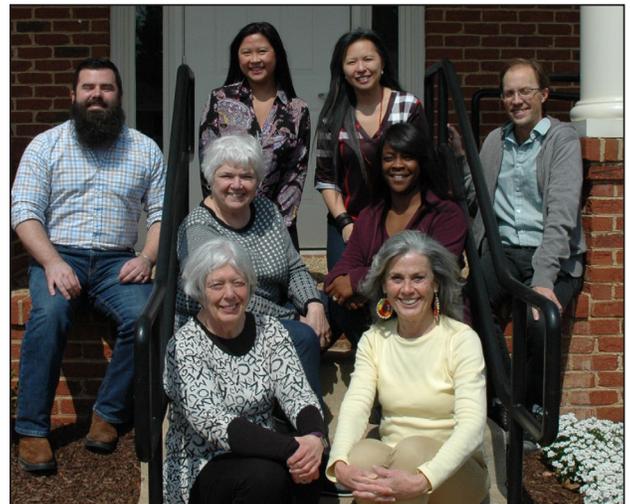
Contributing to the validity of the study, diverse panels of social work subject matter experts (SMEs) provided oversight. These experts were selected for their understanding of the ways the profession has and will continue to evolve as well as the minimum knowledge required in knowledge areas. The five-member Oversight Panel provided guidance and direction as the project activities were carried out, and the 20-member Practice Analysis Task Force was responsible for developing the survey content and establishing test specifications for the exam blueprints.

Participation in the practice survey was the largest in the history of ASWB’s practice analyses, with more than 23,000 responses (compared with approximately 5,000 in the previous analysis). U.S. respondents were licensed in every U.S. state and territory, with the exception of Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands. In addition, all 10 Canadian provinces were represented. For the third consecutive practice analysis, statistical comparisons of the survey responses indicated minimal differences in ratings between the U.S. and Canada. This means that

the blueprints for all categories of licensure exams reflect a valid, reliable interpretation of the social work profession across North America.

“This analysis is especially powerful because of the impressive level of engagement we received from the social work profession,” said Harless. “We built the blueprints on an analysis of nearly five times the survey responses used for the previous study, and were pleased to find that this much larger sample revealed that no major changes were necessary for the content of the next round of exams to be released.”

Because of their direct link to current knowledge, practice analyses are crucial to the legal defensibility of licensure examinations. The practice analysis is critical for ensuring that the content of each exam is relevant to current professional practice and reflects the opinions and expertise of a diverse



Form reviewers met in March to finalize the questions for the four anchor exams that will be used during the passing score study in May. These emeritus Exam Committee members included (from left to right, starting at bottom row): Nora Jessome (BC), Bachelors exam, Debby Jones (BC), Clinical exam; Jane Matheson (AB), Masters exam, Keeva Hartley-Stouffer (MN), Clinical exam; Brent Meyer (GA), Masters exam, Leana Torres (AZ), Advanced Generalist exam, Susanna Sung (MD), Advanced Generalist exam, and Carl Hokanson (MN), Bachelors exam.

group of stakeholders. To ensure that knowledge tested on the exams is necessary for the successful performance of critical tasks, a linkage exercise was carried out by 42 SMEs recruited from the task force, oversight panel, and ASWB exam development volunteers. This exercise provided additional content validity.

Next steps

Releasing the technical report and the new exam blueprints is a significant milestone for the work done to date. But before new exams based on the updated blueprints are ready to be launched on January 2, 2018, passing scores must be determined. More than 1,300 social workers responded to the call for 60 volunteers to participate in the passing score study scheduled to take place in May. This panel will review anchor exams for each category, take the exams, rate each test question for probability that it will be answered correctly, and discuss minimum competence in the content measured by the exams. The point on which pass-fail determinations are made, called the cut score, will be computed based on these activities.

Next, ASWB exam materials will be updated to reflect the new blueprints. “We understand how important it is for candidates to have earlier access to our supplemental exam products,” said Harless. “We plan on providing the new blueprints with the *ASWB Guide to the Social Work Exams* this summer and hope to roll out new versions of the practice tests later in the year.”