



A busy year for exam development staff and volunteers

1,200 scored questions and 500 pretest questions were approved for use on the two new exams that will be released January 2, 2018, in four exam categories: Bachelors, Masters, Advanced Generalist, and Clinical

The Exam Committee usually meets four times a year to review and approve examination questions (called *items*) to be pretested on the licensing examinations. This year was very different, however, due to final preparations for the release of new exams based on the most recent practice analysis, which was conducted in 2015–2016. At this year's Annual Meeting of the Delegate Assembly, the exam program report included an overview of the practice analysis process as well as the Exam Committee's year-end recap of its two meetings, including performance statistics.

Minor changes to the exams

Lavina Harless, director of examination development, reviewed the last two and a half years of the practice analysis process, including infrastructure preparation that occurred in 2017. She spent time comparing graphs of the 2018 blueprints to the 2011 blueprints, noting the content is “not changing all that much. Social work practice remained relatively consistent in the United States and Canada.” The graphs and new content blueprints are on ASWB's [website](#).

In addition to noting the minor structural and editorial modifications to content, Harless pointed out that minor changes were made

to language to provide consistency across the blueprints in each exam category. For the Advanced Generalist exam, she explained, that meant condensing five content areas into four. “The KSAs [Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities] are still very similar,” she said. “All changes were based on research done by SMEs [subject matter experts] we worked with to help us develop these outlines.”

Infrastructure and people power

This year exam development staff focused on infrastructure and harnessing people power to ensure that the new exams would launch on time. The new infrastructure is a highly secure, proprietary database for exam item development that has been three years in the making. Item writers are able to create their items in the system, and item development consultants and exam development staff can then review the items and provide feedback or process as needed. When the Exam Committee is ready to review the item, it is displayed on-screen still within the secure platform.

The database “allows so much more security and efficiency in our processes to create items,” said Harless. “It was important for us to get the system in place for the new exams to come online.”

In terms of harnessing people power, Harless described working with more than 170 subject matter experts to develop the new exams compared to the usual 120 volunteers per year. Volunteers must be social workers licensed in the United States or registered in Canada who are in good standing. The most important criterion for all the different groups who contributed to the process was balancing for diversity—of race, ethnicity, geographic area, practice setting—“everything that represents the profession in that way is important to us,” she said.

Critical outreach

The last area Harless covered was outreach to ASWB stakeholders. Besides information on aswb.org, ASWB’s social media platforms carried frequent posts about the upcoming exam changes, and these were shared by Facebook followers or retweeted. Member boards were given information and links for their board websites, and press releases were sent to other social work organizations and social work magazines.

In addition, ASWB staff made a presentation about exam changes at the 2017 annual program meeting of the Council on Social Work Education and will present at the 2018 Baccalaureate Program Directors annual conference in March. Most important, said Harless: Exam development, exam administration, and the communications and marketing staff “worked tirelessly this year to develop a targeted communications campaign to our exam candidates to make sure they know the changes that are coming, so they can anticipate those and make a decision if they want to take the test this year or next year if they have that choice.”

Building new exam blueprints

To be sure that the ASWB social work examinations reflect current practice and measure the minimal knowledge and skills needed to practice safely, competently, and ethically at entry level, ASWB conducts a practice analysis survey every five to seven years. From 2015 to 2016, ASWB conducted its sixth analysis of the practice of social work to update the content and weighting of the blueprints for the social work licensure exams. In 2017, post-analysis activities involved preparing the new exams based on the results of the practice analysis. The new exams will be released January 2, 2018.

2015-2016

NOVEMBER 2015 - FEBRUARY 2016

[Convened the Practice Analysis Task Force](#) and developed the survey questions and the sampling plan

MARCH 2016

Piloted the survey

APRIL 5 - MAY 16, 2016

Administered the survey to U.S. and Canadian licensed/registered social workers

AUGUST - NOVEMBER 2016

[Conducted a linkage survey \(see sidebar, p. 2\)](#); finalized content outlines (Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities [KSA] statements)

2016-2017

DECEMBER 2016 - FEBRUARY 2017

[Reclassified item bank](#); transferred items

MARCH - MAY 2017

Approved the anchor forms; confirmed final item approval; [released the new content outlines and revised KSAs](#); [completed the passing score study](#); and [released the practice analysis technical report](#)

SEPTEMBER 2017

Approved second forms to be released with the anchor forms in January 2018

DECEMBER 2017

Released revised versions of the [online practice tests](#) (available only for Bachelors, Masters, and Clinical exam candidates) reflecting new content outlines

Maintaining the current exams

ASWB continued to maintain the current examinations: writing and reviewing test items, reviewing examination forms, and conducting item review, among other activities. Bora Sunseri of Louisiana, Clinical exam committee chair, and Stephanie Washington of Texas, Masters exam committee chair, closed out the exam program report with an explanation of what the 18-member committee does and how the work is done. They also shared statistics about the number of items the committee worked on and the disposition of the items. Bachelors exam committee chair Mary Stebbins of Virginia was not able to attend this year's meeting.

Sunseri reviewed the Exam Committee's charge and the importance of the committee process to ensuring that the exams reflect, in Harless's words, "a balance of science and social work practice expertise." Sunseri noted that each exam subcommittee is balanced for demographics and practice diversity, which can lead to "passionate discussions" about how an item is written when a correct answer may depend, for example, on jurisdictional factors.

The main task of the Exam Committee is to review items to be pretested on the exams. Pretest items are not included in a test-taker's score, but psychometric statistics about the item are gathered to determine how the item performs. If the item performs well according

to these measurements, it will at some future time be added to the bank of operational, or scored, items.

The committee process includes evaluating items for content and quality as well as for editorial structure. Sunseri shared examples of some of the things the committee looks for, including: whether the item is focused, whether it has more than one correct answer, and whether it is appropriate for use in Canada. Stylistic elements that the committee looks for include grammar, readability for candidates for whom English is a second language—including candidates who use sign language—and cultural bias. Saving an item by rewriting it is preferable to deleting it, she noted, and "there is always someone who is willing to take it."

Washington echoed Sunseri's comments about the value of saving items when she reviewed the committee's performance for the year. Washington reported that in 2017 the committees deleted only nine items out of a total of 558 new items reviewed. "We try to hold on to them," she said, "because so much time and money goes into creating them. We are 'true social workers'—we stay with the items until the end."

In addition to the nine deletions, the committee approved 409 items for pretest, returned 21 to the writer with feedback for suggested improvements, moved three items to another exam, and reviewed 116

in pairs only, which the committee will review on-screen in 2018.

The Exam Committee also reviewed 607 "problem items" that were flagged for statistical concerns or for content reasons by the form reviewers. Form reviewers are emeritus Exam Committee members who are responsible for reviewing the final version of an entire test (form) before it goes online. As part of this process, the committee reviewed the statistics and content of each item on-screen and made real-time changes in the test administrator's item bank. Committee members revised 345 problem items and approved them to be pretested again, approved 98 items without changes, and archived 164 items.

The committee spent many hours working in darkened rooms reviewing items on-screen in the new system. "We got the job done," Washington said. "We have a good time in the darkened room. ... After we take off our 'reviewing hat,' we have a good time afterwards, too."

For more information about Exam Committee members, their diversity, and the variety of support roles and capacities they fill, Harless referred members to the [2017 Exam Committee Yearbook](#). For more information about the practice analysis, a [summary](#) or the [full report](#) of the 2017 Analysis of the Practice of Social Work is available for download.