

What do licensing exams measure?

Licensing exams have a narrow but important purpose. They help regulatory boards protect the public by providing a fair and objective indicator that a licensure applicant who passes the exam possesses the minimum knowledge and skills needed to practice safely the first day on the job. Licensing examinations are not intended to be outcome measures that assess the quality of social work education programs. Using them for this purpose does not serve public protection.

Licensing exams test entry-level competence while education teaches the breadth of the profession

Education provides aspiring social workers with broad foundational knowledge of the profession. Educators teach the breadth of various subjects to help students develop a holistic understanding that will serve them throughout their social work careers.

Licensing examinations focus on the knowledge and skills a social worker needs at entry to practice. The role of the licensing exam is to show that a licensure applicant who passes the exam has the minimum professional competence to avoid harming the public. A licensing examination therefore comprises only a small portion of the material covered in a bachelor's or master's program in social work; it cannot be considered "comprehensive" in the academic sense.

Passing a licensing exam is one of three components necessary to demonstrate fitness to practice

Social work regulatory boards grant licenses to applicants based on factors that include a degree from an accredited **education** program, completion of supervised **experience** for some license categories, and a passing score on a licensing **exam**. All three reflect different and equally important aspects of a licensure applicant's fitness to practice. Regulatory boards rely on the combination of these independent measures to determine competence.

Earning a degree from an accredited social work program demonstrates that an applicant has learned the fundamental knowledge base of the profession. Successfully completing experiential training indicates that an applicant has developed practice skills. Passing the licensing exam demonstrates that the applicant has the entry-level knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to practice safely and ethically.

This three-element competency model provides checks and balances and a certain stability for decision-making. If performance on a licensing exam were to be construed as an educational outcome measure, the legitimacy of the licensing decision—and public protection—would suffer. One danger would be the potential for education programs to focus only on knowledge that is needed at entry to practice. The regulatory board's ability to assess the licensure applicant would then be compromised because the education component would be lacking the broad foundational knowledge base that a regulatory board relies on when using education as a determinant of competence.

Practice-based licensing exams are not designed to measure educational outcomes

Licensing exams are not built with educational outcomes in mind. They are based on a practice analysis, a survey that solicits information from a diverse group of professionals in the field about what they need to know and the tasks they need to be able to perform to practice safely the first day on the job. This survey does not measure knowledge of education program content. For this reason, among others, it is impossible for licensing exams to be used as educational outcome measures.

Licensing exams measure the ability to practice safely and competently at entry to practice

The only outcome that licensing exams measure is the ability to practice safely and competently at entry to practice. This limitation is intentional. Just as licensing exams are developed by an independent regulatory entity, the development of educational outcome measures is the responsibility of independent educational accrediting bodies. When the three pillars of the profession—education, practice, and regulation—retain independent accountability for their respective areas, public protection is strengthened.