

Chapter 8

Testing Programs

Introduction

The states have a responsibility to ensure that licensing examinations are fair, sound, valid and secure. Directors must consider how an exam is developed, who is involved in the development process, how the exam is offered and how security is maintained. Nearly every state has contracted with an outside vendor to assist in examination development and administration. These testing vendors employ test development experts and psychometricians to construct and evaluate examinations.

The primary purpose of a state examination and licensing program is to protect consumers. Examinations should be consistent across the states in difficulty level, content and subject matter. They should be uniformly administered and scored. Examinations should be psychometrically sound, using methods for setting and maintaining passing standards—i.e., cut scores—that are in accordance with testing industry best practices. They should use resources such as: 1) “Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing,” developed jointly by the American Educational Research Association (AERA), American Psychological Association (APA) and National Council on Measurement in Education (NCME); and 2) the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission’s (EEOC) Uniform Guidelines on Employee Selection Procedures (29 CFR 1607). Through valid, reliable and legally defensible test development practices, candidates will have a fair and equitable opportunity to pass an exam, regardless of which state exam they take. Ideally, pass rates should be consistent throughout the states; however, statistics from national examination administration have shown that the pass rates for examinations for the same line of insurance vary significantly among the states. Other variables may contribute to pass rates, such as state education systems, demographics, the existence of a prelicensing education requirement, and the quality of such prelicensing education, but the states should work with their test vendors to be sure that they eliminate any practices that do not measure the entry-level knowledge, duties and responsibilities of an insurance producer.

Different states take different approaches to the development and administration of producer license examinations. Some of the states exercise significant control over test development and review. Other states rely almost entirely on outside experts. In most of the states, the state does not pay any fee to a testing vendor, and the cost of test development and administration is passed through to the test-takers. Most of the states reserve the right to preapprove any fees charged by testing vendors.

With the state licensing system increasingly built on reciprocity, it is in the best interest of consumers, state insurance regulators, industry, producers, and prospective producers for state licensing directors to establish guidelines that promote efficiency and consistency throughout the licensing process. Directors should also reduce or eliminate artificial barriers that impede qualified applicants from obtaining a license.

The purpose of this chapter is to recommend best practices for the states in testing administration in the following areas:

1. Test development and review.
2. Test administration.
3. Test results.
4. Expectations for test vendors.

This chapter was developed with assistance from insurance test vendors, industry representatives, education providers, and state insurance regulators.

Producer Licensing Model Act Guidelines on Examinations

Section 5 of the *Producer Licensing Model Act* (#218) contains guidance for administering licensing examinations. Under Section 5, all residents are expected to complete a written examination, which should include the following:

1. The entry-level knowledge required for an individual concerning the lines of authority (LOAs) for which the application is made.
2. The duties and responsibilities of an insurance producer.
3. The applicable insurance laws and regulations of the state.

Section 5 grants the insurance commissioner authority to hire an outside testing service to administer examinations and impose nonrefundable examination fees.

Model #218 contains several exemptions from prelicensing education and examination requirements. An individual who is licensed as a nonresident in a state and who moves into that state, or an individual who moves from his or her home state to another state and seeks a resident license, is not required to complete an examination for the LOA(s) previously actively held in the prior resident state as long as application is made within 90 days of the change in residence and the prior resident state indicates that the producer was licensed in good standing. In this situation, a nonresident state should never impose prelicensing education or examination requirements.

The Uniform Licensing Standards (ULS) provide that examinations are not generally required for limited lines, but it is acceptable to require examinations for areas such as crop and surety.

Model #218 leaves test development and administration to the discretion of the individual states. Section 5(A) of Model #218 requires, “[a] resident individual applying for an insurance producer license shall pass a written examination,” and the examination must test the knowledge of the individual in three areas:

1. The specific LOAs for which the application is made.
2. The entry-level duties and responsibilities of an insurance producer.
3. The applicable insurance laws and regulations of the state.

Beyond these broad subject matter categories, Section 5 states that tests “shall be developed and conducted under rules and regulations prescribed by the insurance commissioner.”

In order to provide more uniformity in state licensing practices, the 2012 revised ULS for Exam Content or Subject Area and Testing Administration Standards establishes implementation of the “Exam Content and Testing Administration Recommended Best Practices found in Chapter 8 of the NAIC *State Licensing Handbook*” as the uniform standard.

Test Development and Review

Test development experts believe that licensing examinations should measure the minimum competency required for a candidate to perform at an entry level. Therefore, test content and curriculum development should be focused on assessing whether a candidate demonstrates sufficient knowledge to pass an examination that is appropriately targeted to an entry-level producer.

The examination should not dictate the curriculum that an entry-level insurance producer should master. Instead, the test content should be developed using the steps outlined below. Examinations and curriculums should be updated to reflect any changes in insurance laws, regulations or industry practice. An online candidate guide should be available and provide detailed testing and licensing procedures, as well as content outlines with cross-references to the curriculum.

Input from trainers who conduct test preparation courses may assist in the development of the curriculum and the exam content outline; however, some state insurance regulators believe it is not appropriate to invite these trainers to participate in reviewing final examination questions. Education providers who do not offer prelicensing education courses (such as continuing education [CE] providers) are sometimes used during test development. There are generally two approaches to examination construction. A bank-based test generates individual examinations from a large bank of items. A form-based examination will consist of a specified set of predesigned test forms that are rotated. The states use both methods, and both are psychometrically acceptable. Although contracted outside experts play a major role in test development in most jurisdictions, the state should have a regular process and procedures for developing and reviewing licensing examinations to ensure that those examinations are properly focused on the minimum competencies required of an entry-level producer. Some items that should be included in the plan include:

1. Procedures to ensure that a job analysis survey that includes input from state insurance regulators and the industry is conducted at regular intervals to determine the requirements and work performed by an entry-level insurance producer.
2. Regular, ongoing review and assessment of producer licensing examinations in the event of legislative or regulatory changes that could affect the accuracy of exam content.
3. An annual review of the examination development process conducted with the state and the testing vendor.
4. Depending on test volume, test performance, and the need for content changes, either an annual, or at least biannual, substantive review of the examination and the psychometric properties of the test. These efforts should include the involvement of content or test development professionals, department personnel and industry representatives, including recent, entry-level producers.
5. A fair and valid state-based test should incorporate knowledge, skills and abilities that measure state-specific and national expertise. This balance will shift depending on the subject matter. For example, life insurance laws and regulations tend to be more similar among the states, while health insurance standards can vary widely.
6. If the state collects demographic data, it should be reviewed annually.

Developing the Questions

Developing a valid and sound bank of test questions, often called “items,” is perhaps the most critical piece of any testing program. The items need to be at the appropriate level of difficulty. Items should be relevant to the profession and effective in evaluating whether the person taking the exam possesses the knowledge, skills and abilities critical to competently performing the job and safely practicing in the profession. To create this balance, most of the states use a combination of local subject matter experts (SMEs) and content or test development professionals. The local panel should include new and experienced producers to help establish such a balance.

Using multiple item writers to develop test content is a common practice, but it can lead to variation in test item style, format and difficulty. Developing a style guide with templates, development standards and rules can go a long way in improving item consistency, format and variety. Content development training can ensure that writers have the tools they need to develop credible, legally defensible items and templates that can be leveraged to create multiple variations of the same question.

Passing Score vs. Pass Rate

A passing score, sometimes called a “cut score,” is the minimum score one needs to achieve in order to pass the exam. The “pass rate” is the percentage of candidates who actually pass the exam. The test development process will consider data from actual tests and data from reviewers rating the items and exams in evaluating the cut score.

In some of the states, the cut scores are arbitrarily established by rule or regulation. This is not a valid testing practice. Cut scores should be based on data collected through the test-development process. Regulatory licensing exams typically target a level referred to as “minimum” competency, rather than “average” competency. Licensing examinations try to determine who has the minimum competency to safely practice in a profession without compromising the health and safety of the public. An arbitrary cut score, which is the practice in some of the states, tends to focus on the average, rather than minimum, competency. Thus, qualified candidates could be cut because they fall below the average, not because their competency is unacceptable.

Exam Scoring

Some of the states administer a one-part or one-score exam, while others administer two-part exams. In the one-part exam, general product knowledge and state-specific content are scored together. In the states with a two-part exam, the candidate must separately pass both the general product knowledge exam and the state-specific exam in order to be eligible to apply for a license for the LOA requested. A third variation is to require the first-time test-taker to pass an exam on state-specific insurance laws and regulations once. All additional LOAs are tested on general product knowledge only.

Preliminary review of pass rates indicates a tendency for more candidates to fail in the states that require two-part exams. There is no evidence that two-part exams increase consumer protections or that the states that administer one-

part exams license producers who do not know applicable state law. The states are encouraged to move to one-part exams to allow for more success among candidates without jeopardizing consumer protections.

Exam Content

As of May 2013, the states have no standard exam curriculum. The NAIC is encouraging more uniform approaches by considering the best practices for testing programs listed at the end of this chapter to be standards for all jurisdictions to work toward. The Producer Licensing (EX) Task Force formed a subgroup of five states to develop a draft national content outline using the life and annuity LOA as a pilot. The national content outline provides guidance for entry-level subject matter that the states should test for, as well as information that will assist candidates in identifying relevant knowledge to study in preparation for the exam.

Some experts have recommended that examinations should be constructed with the following considerations in mind:

1. The states should not target examinations to an artificially set passing score. A state should determine whether its test is focused on assessing the knowledge needed by potential new producers, and only applicants who lack that level of knowledge should fail. The states should use legally defensible, recognized methodology when establishing a cut score.
2. Prior to releasing items into an exam form, the editing and review process employed is critical. This editing process should include the psychometric evaluation of the cognitive level of the items and the reading level of the items, as well as such editorial issues as grammar, sensitivity and style. Psychometric editing is best performed by test development professionals, not state SMEs or item writers. Individuals trained in the complexity of psychometric editing evaluate items in a different, critical light than SMEs or item writers. It is critical, however, to have all final items reviewed and approved by state and national SMEs in the given field for accuracy and relevancy.
3. Each examination should consist of pre-test questions that are being evaluated for performance and questions that previously have been evaluated (pre-tested) and determined to be statistically effective. Each candidate's score should be based only on the previously pre-tested and approved questions. Any time used to respond to pre-test items should not be counted against the test-takers, and responses to pre-test items should not be calculated in the test-taker's score. Pre-test items should not be used as scored items until they have been statistically proven to be effective. The test questions for any new examination should be chosen from the pool of test questions to properly represent the subject-matter outline of the examination.
4. Reports regarding exam pass rates, candidate demographics when collected, and number of exams administered should be made available to the public. Reports should include first-time pass success by subject area. Whenever possible, this information should be tracked by, and be made available to, each education provider so they may evaluate their programs and instructors and be provided with data needed for course development. The states may ask for, but generally cannot require, information on candidate population, gender, ethnicity, education level and income level. When candidate demographics are collected, reports should include the percentage and number of examinees who passed the examination by race, ethnicity, gender, education level and native language. This information is necessary for the selection of future test questions, and it will aid in making testing transparent and assessing whether differences in test scores are correlated with relevant demographic factors.
5. A state advisory committee consisting of state insurance regulators and the industry, including, where possible, recently licensed producers, should annually or, if changes are not needed every year, at least biannually work with the testing vendor to review the questions on each examination form or bank of items for substantive and psychometric requirements. Adjustments should be made to the examination to eliminate any questions that might be inaccurate or unclear, that might test subject matter that is beyond what a new producer should know, or that exhibit unsatisfactory psychometric properties.
6. Licensing examinations should be reviewed at least annually. However, if during any rolling 12-month period, a licensing examination exhibits uncharacteristically high or low pass rates, such as less than 60% or

more than 80%; unexplained fluctuations in testing volume; or other significant deviations, that examination should be reviewed immediately.

A state testing program should include statistical analysis of test items in the field and gather feedback on the candidate performance on the individual items. The most obvious and critical use of this information is to ensure that exams are equivalent and to evaluate the accuracy with which items differentiate between candidates who are minimally qualified and candidates who are not. The psychometric review can result in the continued use of items, the modification of items, or the deletion of items from the bank.

A professional test vendor should use a comprehensive strategy for developing test items and ensuring measurement of the knowledge, skills and abilities necessary for initial insurance licensees to perform their jobs effectively. The steps may include:

1. Conducting a committee-based job analysis.
2. Developing content specifications and weightings.
3. Developing items.
4. Editing and reviewing items with SMEs to ensure that items meet the required criteria.
5. Obtaining item difficulty (e.g., Angoff method) estimates to establish a passing score.
6. Developing item sampling groups to structure each examination.
7. Creating equivalent forms.

Test Development Deliverables

A state licensing director should expect to receive the following items to ensure that the testing vendor has provided all items necessary to administer a successful testing program:

1. Finalized task and knowledge statements reflecting the requirements of each licensed insurance position.
2. Content specifications for each licensing examination.
3. A set of approved, relevant and important items for use on each licensing examination.
4. A list of references used to develop the test items.
5. Candidate Information Bulletins (CIBs).
6. A technical report describing the procedures used and results obtained from the test development process for each licensing examination.

Candidate Information Bulletin

A CIB should describe the examinations, examination policies and procedures, and the consequences of violating security procedures. A testing vendor should be capable of making changes to the information contained within the CIB during any contract year at the state's request.

The CIB should be available at no charge to candidates, trainers and insurers in hard copy or in electronic format via the internet. The state licensing director should consider including the following topics in the CIB:

1. How to contact the testing vendor.
2. Requirements for taking an examination.
3. How to apply for an examination, including receiving authorization of eligibility from the state, prelicensing education, and background checks.
4. Links to current application forms.
5. How to obtain current forms in hard copy, if available in hard copy.
6. Examination fees.
7. Scheduling procedures.
8. The content outline and format of the examination.
9. Supplies provided at the test center.
10. The time limit for the examination.
11. The scoring system.
12. Security procedures.

13. Examination process and procedures.
14. Appropriate examination-taking strategies (e.g., “There is no penalty for incorrect answers, so be sure to answer every question.”).
15. Appropriate use of scratch paper, calculators, and/or other support material.
16. Sample questions.
17. Specific information about taking the test on the computer.
18. List of approved reference materials.
19. List of test centers, alternative test centers, and driving directions to each.
20. Procedures for requesting special accommodation.
21. Examination registration forms.
22. Licensing requirements and procedures.
23. Refund policies.
24. Holiday or weather-related test center closures.
25. Instructions about how to contact the state insurance department.

A state should approve each CIB before it is published. The licensing director should work with the vendor to set a timeline that will allow for final publication of an updated CIB in advance of the expiration of the prior edition of the CIB. The new edition should be provided to test preparation trainers at least six weeks in advance of implementation so that training materials can be updated.

Technology Issues

A licensing director should consult with the state’s information technology (IT) staff to ensure that the testing vendor can deliver data to the state insurance department. This is critical when a state changes testing vendors. This is also critical if the state directs a vendor to send data to a different location than the state insurance department. Any transition should include a testing phase for hardware, software, and state insurance department staff.

The state and the testing vendor should jointly agree on a timeline for introducing new or updated examinations. State IT staff also should be consulted.

Legal Defensibility

Items developed must also be legally defensible to protect the state in the event of a legal challenge. To protect the state from liability, each exam should be critically reviewed from a content and psychometric perspective to ensure that the exam was developed according to recognized standards. Validation procedures for licensing examinations should be designed to comply with content validation requirements of the EEOC’s Uniform Guidelines on Employee Selection Procedures (29 CFR 1607).

States should require testing vendors to follow and document standardized methods. This should include appropriate test development personnel in the process. Using the appropriate, credentialed professionals is critical, as there are multiple steps involved in the test development process and various methodologies that can be used for each step. State licensing directors should discuss all options with qualified professionals.

Vendor Responsibilities

Test vendors should be able to meet minimum guidelines for sufficient availability, facilities, personnel and openness in terms of providing information related to their operations.

The states, and not the test vendors, must be responsible for all examination content and content outlines. The vendor should provide accessible information regarding the registration system through the internet, toll-free telephone numbers, interactive voice response, fax, and other available technologies. The available information should include permitting candidates to view exam test dates and access forms and content guidelines without requiring prior payment and scheduling of an exam.

The vendor should promptly provide the state with all pertinent information, including prompt notification of any candidate complaints, changes to test administration, conflicts at examination test sites, or other information requested or required by the state.

The vendor should provide quality, accessible facilities, with an established system of examination site supervision that ensures that competent site administrators consistently provide accurate information to applicants.

Where a vendor operates test sites in multiple states, the vendor should permit any applicant to take a state's examination in another state, under the same conditions that would apply if the exam were taken at an in-state location.

Vendors should be required, on an ongoing basis, to collect the data on customer satisfaction and, if directed by the state, to make those data available to state insurance regulators, the industry, and the public.

Test Administration

The testing process should be fair and accessible for all candidates. A state should consider including the following elements below in its licensing process to ensure that applicants have equal access to examinations.

Secure Administration

The security of the test center network is important in maintaining the integrity of a test. A vendor should be equipped with adequate security features and qualified test center administrators. Each proctor should be trained and tested on his or her ability to supervise exams. A vendor should have systems in place to ensure the fair, consistent and even administration of the exam in every location. A vendor should also have a method to detect attempts to record questions. For example, a vendor should track multiple examination attempts by individuals to assess if the candidate is intentionally failing the exam so it can be repeated. A vendor should be required to notify the state immediately if the vendor suspects that the integrity of an examination has been compromised.

Test Locations and Registration

Test locations should be set up to provide flexibility and convenience. Realizing that the states have different geographic challenges and diverse population density, a state should consider, where possible, requiring the following elements:

1. Testing should be made available at locations convenient to residents of all areas of the state.
2. Test locations should provide enough testing capacity so a candidate can test at the desired location within two to five business days of registration.
3. Exam site hours should include evening and weekend hours.
4. Test vendors should provide regular reports, as required by the state, detailing site usage and availability data.
5. Test registration should be available online or by telephone and allow for next day testing when space is available. A state should consider tracking telephone hold and wait times to monitor how long callers wait.
6. State guidelines should provide for flexible means for payment of fees for testing, fingerprinting and other licensing. States should consider methods that facilitate payment by companies.

Disabilities

A state should require a vendor to develop a system that accommodates the physically impaired that is not related to a testing candidate's knowledge of insurance. Visually-impaired and hearing-impaired persons should be accommodated through all steps of the licensing process, pursuant to national standards set by the federal Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

Examinations in Languages Other Than English

Some industry experts suggest caution about using translated or interpreted exams. The material may not directly translate into equivalent terms or meaning. Cultural biases might cause incorrect interpretation of a meaning. Some experts recommend that tests should be developed and administered in English, especially if other materials necessary to perform job duties for the profession, such as contracts, are in English. State licensing directors should review state law and consult with legal counsel about the appropriateness of offering examinations in a foreign language.

Reporting Examination Results

State licensing procedures should include guidelines that facilitate the prompt issuance of licenses once an applicant passes a test. Elements might include:

1. Pass/fail notices should be issued at exam sites upon completion of the exam. If an applicant has not achieved a passing score, the applicant should receive immediate notification of failure. States vary as to whether successful completion is reported with a precise score or merely an indication that the candidate passed the exam. When a candidate does not pass the exam, the state should provide the precise score and the percentage of questions in each subject area that the applicant answered incorrectly.
2. If a state issues a paper license, and if it has been predetermined that an applicant has met all requirements necessary for licensure, including any required fingerprint report, a license should be issued at the exam site, or within 48 hours of completing all necessary requirements.
3. The state should send an email or other timely communication to a candidate to whom a license has been issued outside the test site or provide information to applicants as to how to check online.
4. Within 24 hours of license issuance, the new licensee's information should be added to the state's database, and the updated status should be sent to the National Insurance Producer Registry (NIPR).
5. The states should work with their vendors to report aggregate results in a way that is more uniform with other states.
6. First-time pass rates should be maintained and made available to the public. First-time pass rates are defined as the percentage of candidates who pass the whole test the first time.
7. In performing background checks, the use of an electronic process should be required whenever possible.
8. In those states requiring fingerprints, where possible, exam sites should have the capability to collect electronic fingerprints.

Retesting or Notice of Failure

A state licensing plan should include a method to facilitate prompt retesting of applicants who have failed a test. The "non-passing" notice should break scores out by each subject area. If the candidate requests to make another attempt, an examination should be made available within a reasonable time period.

Producer Exam Content and Testing Administration Recommended Best Practices for State Insurance Regulators

- States should use accepted psychometric methods, including job analysis, to determine if the examination content falls within the content domain that a minimally competent candidate of that specific line of authority tested would be expected to know.
- States should set passing scores—cut scores—and difficulty level using psychometric methods and appropriate SMEs based on what an entry-level producer needs to know.
- States are encouraged to move to one-part exams to allow for more success among candidates without jeopardizing consumer protections.
- States should require the test vendor, or other entity responsible for test development, to document the process for ensuring quality control and validity of the examination, including psychometric review and editing and analysis of item bias or cultural and gender sensitivity.
- To allow for meaningful comparison, all jurisdictions should define first-time pass rate as the percentage of candidates who pass the whole test the first time.
- At least annually, reports regarding exam pass rates, candidate demographics when collected, and number of exams administered should be made available to the public. Reports should include first-time pass success and average scoring by subject area. Whenever possible, the reports should be available by education provider and provided to them.

- A state advisory committee consisting of state insurance regulators and the industry—including, where possible, recently licensed producers—should annually work with the testing vendor to review the questions on each examination form for substantive and psychometric requirements. If, during any other time, any examination results exhibit significant unexplained deviations, the examination should be reviewed.
- States should work with testing vendors and approve CIBs that describe the examinations and examination policies and procedures, and provide sufficient examination content outline and study references for the candidate to prepare for the examination. Updated editions of the CIB/content outline should be provided to prelicensing education providers at least six weeks in advance of implementation so that training materials can be updated.
- Testing should be made available at locations reasonably convenient to residents of all areas of the state, with registration available online or by telephone and the ability for a candidate to schedule testing within two to five business days of registration.
- Pass/fail notices should be issued at exam sites upon completion of the exam. The fail notice should break out scores by subject area. The state should provide a method to facilitate prompt retesting, while allowing a reasonable time for candidates to review and prepare for retest.
- States should deliver exams in a secure test center network that employs qualified test proctors.
- States should set clear performance standards for test vendors and require accountability.