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Forum: Nothing Can be Changed Until it is Faced: Social Work's Licensing Justice Journey

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Abstract

Disaggregated pass rate data for the social work licensing exams has revealed gaps in pass rates between racial, ethnic, and age groups. ASWB is committed to collaborating across the social work profession to find systemic solutions that are grounded in social work values.

Keywords: ASWB, licensing, social work exams, content validity, professional competence

Licensing—in any profession—serves two primary functions: ensuring that practitioners can practice competently and providing recourse to the public when questions of competence or ethical behavior arise. Social work licensing exists to protect public health and safety. Like the profession's code of ethics, it is rooted in the six core values of social work: service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence.

Licensing helps equalize the power in the practitioner–client system, holds social workers accountable for their integrity and competence, and reflects the profession's commitment to the dignity and worth of the people served. Fundamentally, social work licensing is a force for social justice.

Licensing also reflects social work's status as a *profession*, not just a job. Professional licensing acknowledges that employing social work approaches, methods, and tools requires specialized knowledge, education, and skill. Regulation of the field reflects the government's recognition that social work impacts public health and safety and should be guided by the standards that define the profession.

Facing it

In 2021, ASWB's Board of Directors made the groundbreaking decision to analyze and report disaggregated data on pass rates for the social work licensing exams, including a 10-year analysis report and additional information broken down by state, province, territory, and social work degree program.

In publishing these reports, ASWB became the first organization to publish disaggregated pass rates for any health or human services field and one of the few regulatory associations to share this level of descriptive data. Publishing disaggregated information about pass rates prompted a profession-wide reckoning, and the conversations around the data have been as illuminating as they are difficult. But these conversations are necessary if there is to be constructive dialogue across all sectors of the profession toward addressing the issues raised by these disparate outcomes.

We knew that this data—showing lower pass rates for Black test-takers, older test-takers and those for whom English is not a first language—would be met with a range of responses including anger, disappointment, and sadness. These are appropriate responses to injustice. Nonetheless, disclosure of this data is critical to equitably serving the social work profession and improving the licensure process. As social workers, we

know this pattern is all too familiar in a society where racism, oppression, and white supremacy are embedded in every system and institution. Social work, of course, is not immune.

Criterion-referenced competence measures are part of the entry-to-practice requirements across professions in the United States—from physicians and attorneys to architects and engineers. But it is social work—a profession in which women and historically marginalized populations are represented at relatively high levels—that has been targeted by calls to remove exams from licensure requirements. These efforts, some coming from within social work itself, could have many unintended consequences, including calling into question our very status as a profession and threatening justice-based workforce values such as pay equity and parity.

Every candidate enters the testing room bringing a unique history, a differing educational background, and varying degrees of privilege. For most, the exam is the finish line on the journey to licensure. But each candidate arrives at that finish line having traveled a different path. For some candidates, the path is smooth and level. For others it is fraught with hurdles, barriers, and threats—uphill the entire way.

Changing it

ASWB is committed to working to narrow the gaps in pass rates, but in the context of systemic inequities, solutions will come only from concerted, long-term effort across all sectors of social work. The regulatory community is already taking action to conduct more in-depth research, review our administration policies, explore new ways to measure competency, and offer new resources to candidates and educators. But a sustainable impact on these vast systemic injustices will not happen through our actions alone. Collectively, social work has the tools to close the gaps reflected in the pass rate data.

Applying systems thinking to systemic problems

Long before the licensure process is initiated, aspiring social workers bring greatly varying levels of life experience to their first day of social work class. Preparation typically includes earning a degree from an accredited institution—including coursework, practicum placements, and learning assessment. It may also require postgraduate supervised experience which also varies greatly in quality and depth.

Social workers know that Black, Indigenous, and Latino social work students often share experiences of the harms of racism and white supremacy in their lives; these forces have distorted the history and structure of educational institutions, disenfranchising countless people all along the micro, mezzo, macro continuum.

Instructional design research refers to *cognitive load* as the working memory that our minds use as we navigate the world. I would suggest that when considering our pervasive societal ills, we should consider *psychosocial load* as well. By this, I mean the effects of factors such as chronic anti-Blackism, socioeconomic gaps (e.g., Black social work students graduate from educational programs with significantly higher loan debt than any other group.), and other destructive dynamics that affect candidates disproportionately along their path toward licensure ⁴. Reducing the impact of the psychosocial load that candidates carry to the licensure process is well within the field's collective capacity.

Embedding diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in every part of a system

Welcoming historically marginalized people to the table is critical whenever important decisions are being made. But that inclusion alone is not enough to eliminate disparities. ASWB has, for decades, selected item writers and Examination Committee members who represent racial, ethnic, and

⁴ [The-Social-Work-Profession-Findings-from-Three-Years-of-Surveys-of-New-Social-Workers-Dec-2020.pdf](#)

practice setting diversity. In 2022, the pool of item writers closely mirrored the population of graduates from MSW and BSW programs as reported in 2020 *Statistics on Social Work Education in the United States* ⁵.

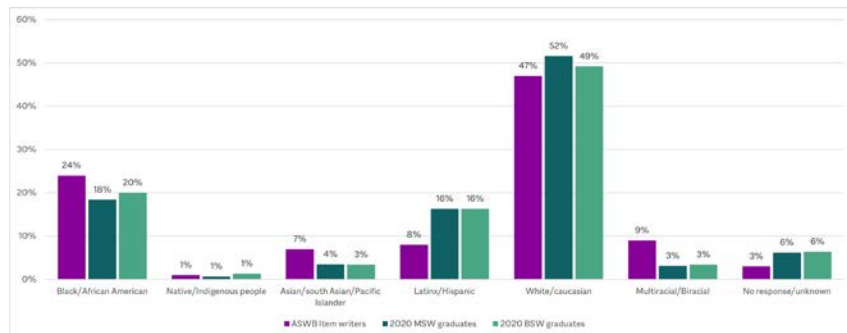


Figure 1: Population of graduates from MSW and BSW programs

ASWB employs robust antibias measures with extensive psychometric tools, working with a diverse group of practicing social workers at every stage of development and eliminating any question that shows signs of bias. Despite those efforts, disparities persist. Prioritizing equity in any process is vital, but it is not sufficient to ensure equal outcomes.

ASWB continues to evaluate the processes and tools we use to mitigate problems in the short term and as a means of promoting accountability for the long term.

Progress through strengths-based interventions

As social workers, we know that approaching a challenge through a strengths-based perspective makes positive outcomes more likely. We need

⁵ Council on Social Work Education. (2021). *2020 statistics on social work education in the United States*. <https://www.cswe.org/research-statistics/research-briefs-and-publications/2020-annual-statistics-on-social-work-education>

to investigate the characteristics of successful test-takers across states and provinces, schools, regions, ages, and ethnicities in order to generate meaningful data and learn lessons that can be applied broadly.

Working with experts at the Human Resources Research Organization (HumRRO), ASWB is conducting qualitative research on social workers' experiences with licensing. We are listening to and learning from those who are successful on the exams as well as those who are not. We anticipate that this qualitative research will complement the quantitative data provided by the pass rate analysis, and we will report on our findings when the work is complete.

Accountability: Changing what we face

By publishing disaggregated data and committing to annual updates, the social work profession, including social work regulation, can be held more accountable for progress in closing the gaps in the pass rates. Meanwhile, we are already making changes to the testing experience and exploring changes to the exam itself. Changing assessment tools alone, however, will not bring parity to the profession. Unless and until we ensure that candidates have substantially similar experiences throughout their respective paths, the finish line will remain elusive for many.

ASWB continuously evaluates the candidate experience and recently implemented modifications to exam procedures to streamline the process of sitting for the licensing exams, reduce test-taker anxiety, and lessen the psychosocial load on candidates. We have also made new resources available at no cost to social work educators.

In addition, ASWB began a pilot program in January 2023 to offer free access to a specialized program for test mastery to social workers who are unsuccessful in passing an exam. This program, developed and operated by an independent firm, includes an individualized assessment and a personalized report with information and insights test-takers can use to prepare for and perform as well as possible on their exam retake. We look

forward to hearing more from those participating in the program to understand its impact.

Forward progress: Working to solve complex, long-term problems

ASWB is creating opportunities for independent research to inform regulatory administration and deepen understanding of how to ensure greater equity within the profession's systems, including competence measures. A request for proposals for funded research will be issued in March 2023.

We are working with experts in assessment and testing to explore various ways that social workers can demonstrate their competence prior to entering practice. Such alternative approaches could prove more equitable, but research into these assessments is somewhat thin and progress will not be immediate. Moreover, with more than 60,000 licensing exams given every year, any new assessments must work at scale and be administered objectively. They must also be statistically reliable and valid.

ASWB is committed to helping find better ways to measure competence as a vital part of regulation. Social workers should be required to demonstrate their competence, just as other professionals must demonstrate before they are trusted with the public's safety and well-being.

The journey ahead

Experience has taught me that when an organization does groundbreaking things, it can encounter rough terrain, but new opportunities are also unearthed. ASWB is embarking on this justice journey for the long haul and is committed to forwarding progress through partnership and collaboration.

Social work, as a profession, is not perfect. Its history is grounded in some of the same inequities that exist throughout our society. But given our core values, it is fitting that social work is now among the first professions to openly address the disparities in testing outcomes. As James Baldwin said,

“Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”

Lasting change—if it is to happen for an individual, a community, or a society—takes time, collaboration, and commitment. We at ASWB are continuing our quest to not only face change head on, but to lead meaningful change effort. We invite the rest of the profession to join us on this journey.