

Considerations for Exam Re-administration

Question: *When establishing policies for exam re-administration, what should be considered?*

Answer: In the context of high-stakes testing involving examinations used for licensure purposes, defensible test administration policies need to be established and adhered to. These policies should take into consideration the sometimes competing concerns of the public and of candidates, including candidates who do not pass the examination and are likely to want to test again.

Licensure exams establish that a candidate meets threshold requirements to practice a regulated profession. The public relies on the examination process to weed out those who do not meet basic requirements and the public expects rigor in that process. Candidates who have invested time, money and effort culminating in the final step – the licensure exam -- expect the process to be fair and policies transparent. These expectations are highlighted when a candidate fails the exam. Candidates will need a clear understanding of exam re-administration policies and licensing boards would be well served to understand the rationale underpinning them, so they can act upon them consistently and with confidence. What considerations come into play when establishing criteria for exam re-administration?

Although there is no consensus among testing specialists and psychometricians concerning an appropriate number of exam re-administrations across licensing programs, there is widespread agreement that a candidate should be allowed more than one attempt to pass a licensure exam. Even while acting within their scopes of authority, licensing boards need to be alert to perceptions that their policies create artificial barriers or unduly restrict entry into a profession. There are, however, a number of valid reasons why one would limit the number of re-examination attempts allowed and the time frame within which one can retest. Many boards have adopted policies allowing a candidate a maximum of three attempts, including two re-administrations, to demonstrate minimum competency to enter the profession. These attempts may take place within a year or may be spread across years. Some authors call this policy the “three strikes, you’re out!” policy.

Practical matters factor into these policies. Multiple administrations draw on staff resources – board personnel need to monitor candidate eligibility, process and reprocess score reports, and interact with the candidate; the fact that it is the same candidate involved does not reduce the effort required. Also, licensure examinations can be very expensive and time consuming to create. As a result, a very limited amount of test material may be available to administer to candidates at any given time, which [*should / would / may?*] curb the number of attempts allowed during a particular period. Where the number of forms is few, care should be taken in form selection so that a repeat tester is not able to achieve a passing result because of multiple exposures to the same items.

Relative performance may play a part in the number of retakes allowed because, at a certain point, a board may need to be concerned about security and candidate motivation for continuing to retest when a candidate displays extremely poor performance time and time again. And, even if nothing untoward is occurring, some would argue that boards do a disservice to candidates to allow them to repeatedly retest if they have little prospect of passing the exam.

These and other pertinent factors should be considered and weighed to establish exam re-administration policies that strike a proper balance between the public’s and candidates’ interests in the licensure exam context.