Principles of Fairness:
An Examination Guide for
Credentialing & Registration Boards

The Council on Licensure, Enforcement & Regulation

Introduction

Certification and licensure examinations (or generically, credentialing/registration examinations) may be subject to professional standards set forth in the following key documents:

- *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*, developed jointly by the American Educational Research Association (AERA), the American Psychological Association (APA), and the National Council on Measurement and Education (NCME), which applies to testing in general, and includes a chapter on testing in employment and credentialing.[1]

- *Standards for the Accreditation of Certification Programs*, developed by the National Commission for Certifying Agencies, the accrediting body of the Institute for Credentialing Excellence, for the approval of certification programs.[2]

- *Guidelines for Computer-Based Testing*, developed by the Association of Test Publishers for those developing and administering computer based tests.[3]

- *Code of Fair Testing Practices in Education*, developed by the Joint Committee on Testing Practices.[4]

Principles of Fairness: An Examining Guide for Credentialing & Registration Boards has been developed to address the specific needs of credentialing/registration examinations. Whether a test is developed and administered by the board itself or by an outside testing company, and whether a test is written, practical (i.e., performance), or oral format, the principles listed are designed to be reasonable and, in many cases, based on common sense. Their purpose is to facilitate boards in promoting fairness.

Principles of Fairness recommends testing procedures and practices designed to enable the candidates to fully demonstrate their competence by means of an examination (i.e., on a test). Emphasis is placed on providing essential information to prepare the candidates before the test, providing a test administration environment and procedures conducive to good performance during the test, and providing timely and accurate scoring, standard setting, and reporting after the test. The sequence of before (I), during (II), and after (III) is the basis for the major divisions of this document. Fairness is also a central issue when developing the test. Guidance on test development is presented in Development, Administration, Scoring, and Reporting of Credentialing/registration Examinations: Recommendations for Board Members (CLEAR, 2015)[5].

Credentialing/registration examinations are high stakes tests, intended to assure that individuals have adequate knowledge and/or skill to perform competently and protect the public from harm. Therefore, the primary responsibility of credentialing/registration boards is to ensure the validity, reliability, security, and integrity of examinations. However, these are high stakes tests for candidates as well. For many individuals, a long-term investment of time, money, and effort has been expended to prepare for a particular profession or occupation.

Failure to pass a credentialing/registration examination may be a major career setback. Considerable financial loss and, perhaps, the need to change careers may result. Therefore, failing an examination should be the result of only one phenomenon: inadequate knowledge or skill. Failure based on inadequate information about the testing process, for example, is unfortunate for both the candidate, in terms of lost income, and for the public, in terms of lost access to a competent professional. Thus, candidates, the public, and the professions are beneficiaries of a fair testing process.

Principles of Fairness is a product of review and input by many individuals affiliated with CLEAR. The principles presented are those for which there appears to be a general consensus of professional opinion.

This document was originally developed in 1993, underwent review and revision in 2002 and again in 2015. This document is expected to be reviewed and updated periodically in response to new

developments and new thinking in the field of credentialing/registration examinations.

CLEAR wishes to encourage credentialing/registration boards to promote test fairness assertively. Boards that wish to obtain copies of *Principles of Fairness* should contact CLEAR (859/269-1289). The document is also available at the CLEAR web site.

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Before the Test

The foundation of test fairness is understanding the nature of the terms and conditions that govern the test. Candidates should have this information before the test in order to plan and prepare adequately. Credentialing/registration boards should publish and distribute a candidate handbook that contains all of the following information.

Job- or practice-related test content

A test content outline or blueprint conveys the scope and emphasis of the examination. The outline should list the major content headings of the test and the percentage of items (i.e., questions) administered in each. Test content should focus on the competence required for effective practice. The basis for the test content outline (e.g., a job or practice analysis) should be described.

Test characteristics

Credentialing/registration boards should specify whether the format of the test is written, oral, practical (i.e., performance), or computer-based. A sample test item representing each item format, and a sample answer sheet should be provided where applicable. When the examination is administered on computer, information should be provided about the computer interface including sample screens and information regarding opportunities to practice using the computer.

Test preparation strategies

This information overlaps with the use of the test content outline and test blueprint. Study references may be listed, as well as possible test-taking strategies (e.g., use of test time).

Change of test content

Candidates should be informed in advance regarding when and how a test changes in content, format, difficulty, or length. Changes should be based on changes in practice and based on evidence. (See the Job- or practice-related test content section above.)

Test question evaluation

Credentialing/registration boards should indicate how test items, particularly those used for the first time, are evaluated. Board policies for identifying and handling flawed or defective test items should be indicated.

Bias

Credentialing/registration boards are responsible for assuring that the test is fair to population subgroups. Policies employed to address this issue should be indicated.

Time Limits

Candidates should be informed about the amount of testing time provided for each portion of the examination. Where test times may vary (e.g., in computer adaptive testing), candidates should be provided sufficient information regarding the length of the exam and why test times vary.

Scoring

Information about scoring should include whether items are equally weighted and whether there are penalties for incorrect responses. The types of test results reported should be indicated (i.e., number correct, percentage, scaled, or pass-fail only). If non-scored trial items are administered, their inclusion should be noted.

Pass-fail standard

There are three important issues here. First, candidates should be informed of the pass-fail standard in advance of the test, if possible. Second, the basis or procedure for determining the pass-fail standard should be provided. This includes the type of judgment used, and the types of participants involved in the process (e.g., practitioner, academician). The standard should be based on a reasonable level of performance judged to be needed for competent and safe practice. Third, information should be given regarding the existence of one or multiple pass-fail standards and options available to failing candidates for repeating portions of multi-part examinations, rather than the entire examination.

Reporting test results

Credentialing/registration boards should indicate when test results will be released to candidates and the nature of the results reported. The test result information should include the pass-fail outcome and pass-fail standard. The information may include the total test score obtained, the scoring scale (if applicable), and whether any subscores or other related information is reported.

These latter data should be provided to all failing candidates and may be reported to passing candidates. However, some boards have observed that these data have been used inappropriately by third parties in evaluating the credentials of passing candidates. Therefore, despite the desirability of test and subscore disclosure to all candidates, test results reported to passing candidates need not be as extensive in detail as the results reported to failing candidates.

Registration

Credentialing/registration boards should announce and disseminate information about registering for the examination well before any deadline dates. Procedures for applying and scheduling, including deadlines, eligibility criteria, availability of reasonable accommodations for persons with disabilities, fees, cancellation, refunds, and test center locations, should also be provided.

Test administration

Candidates should be informed when to arrive at the test center, the amount of time required for checking in, when the test actually begins and ends, permitted and prohibited items, whether breaks are allowed, and policies for late admission. Credentialing/registration boards should be aware of days of religious observance and avoid scheduling tests on those days, when possible. Alternate test dates for religious observers may also be needed.

Test center services

Candidates should be informed in advance about availability of services at the test center (e.g., parking, food concessions).

Candidate identification

Candidates should be informed about what proof of identity is required at the examination site. Commonly, two forms of identification are required, one of which must include a photograph of the candidate.

Security

Candidates should be informed of their obligations regarding test security. Candidates should specifically avoid any collaborative or disruptive behavior during the test, removal of test material, reproduction of test material, and discussion of test material after the test. Duplicating test material may violate copyright laws. In addition, candidates should be informed of their obligations to report a suspected violation. Finally, candidates should be informed of score cancellation policies that the board may exercise if a security breach is suspected or revealed.

Supplies/equipment/human subjects brought to the test

Candidates should be informed about their obligations and options for supplies, equipment, and human subjects brought to the test. Candidates should be informed about what resources are available and/or provided at the site, if any. Written examinations may require candidates to bring #2 pencils with erasers; some test providers supply pencils. Some examinations allow candidates to bring calculators and/or reference books. For these tests, candidates need to know which types of calculators and/or reference books are permissible and which are considered unacceptable. For performance tests (i.e., practical examinations), candidates may be required to bring certain types of equipment or human subjects.

Credentialing/registration boards should inform candidates of the consequences of failure to bring needed supplies, equipment, or subjects. Finally, candidates should be informed of any items not permitted, any prohibitions against sharing equipment or supplies, and the consequences of incidents during the test, such as malfunction or breakage of equipment.

Candidates with disabilities

Credentialing/registration boards should comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)[6] of 1990 as amended in 2008[7] and the Canadian Human Rights Act[8]. These acts obligate boards to provide accessible test sites to candidates with documented disabilities and reasonable accommodations of test administration procedures to enable such candidates to demonstrate accurately their knowledge and skill. Credentialing/registration boards should refer directly to the acts for details regarding compliance.

Candidate challenges and appeals

Candidates should be informed of what decisions are subject to appeal (e.g., decisions on eligibility). Candidates should be informed of methods for commenting on or challenging specific items, as well as what to expect after doing so. Most often, examination materials are confidential, and candidates do not have the opportunity to review their test or their responses. Comments and challenges are typically reviewed by the credentialing/registration board or their designees, but specific replies about particular items are not sent to candidates.

Other available types of score verification, such as hand verification of computer scoring, should be described. Retest policies and procedures should be provided also.

During the Test

The primary goal of fairness during the test is to enable candidates to demonstrate fully their knowledge and skill. To promote this goal, care must be taken to ensure that the environment and testing procedures are conducive to good performance.

Physical site

The test center should be well lit, ventilated, free of distracting noises, and have conveniently located restrooms. Upon request, the test center should be accessible to candidates with disabilities. For written examinations, candidates should be provided smooth writing surfaces and adequate space to work. In addition, sufficient space should be provided between candidates to promote privacy and prevent collaboration.

Personnel

Proctors and examiners should be impartial and well trained in the test procedures so that candidates are treated alike. Proctors and examiners should provide uniform and clear instructions to all candidates and be trained carefully to distinguish acceptable from unacceptable issues that may be discussed with candidates. The ratio of proctors and examiners to candidates should be sufficient for effectively monitoring the test examination environment.

For some practical (performance) examinations, additional human subjects participate as patients or clients. Care should be taken to assure the safety and dignity of the subject and the candidate. In addition, the subjects' physical or physiological characteristics should be comparable, such that candidates are not disadvantaged by a specific participant. Subjects should be impartial and trained for their specific roles to avoid facilitating or hindering any candidate.

Security

Security policies and procedures should be designed to prevent premature access to test questions, collaboration during the test, or unauthorized notes from being used or taken. These occurrences may invalidate test scores and jeopardize the integrity of the test. Appropriate procedures include secure storage of tests, secure packaging and shipping, careful and continuous proctor observation, policies for handling suspected cheating on site, and procedures for distributing and collecting test materials to minimize the potential opportunities for theft and loss. Steps should be taken to prevent access to mobile phones and other electronic devices during the examination.

Computer-based testing raises an analogous set of security concerns. Transmittal of examinations and candidate results must be encrypted. Computers and file-servers must be protected from physical or electronic tampering. Systems and procedures must be in place to address technical or operational problems in examination administration.

More information about test security can be found in *Development, Administration, Scoring, and Reporting of Credentialing/Registration Examinations: Recommendations for Board Members* (CLEAR, 2015).

Test materials and equipment

Test booklets and answer sheets should be easy to read and understand. Candidates should be instructed to verify that all pages are present. Examiners' evaluation sheets for practical or performance examinations should document scoring criteria clearly, and should be formatted to mini-

mize the potential for tabulation errors. If equipment is provided to candidates for use during the test, it should be in proper working condition, with suitable replacement if breakage or a malfunction occurs. Candidates should be allowed to become familiar with the operation of the equipment.

Administration

Examinations should be administered at the scheduled time with as few delays as possible. Policies and procedures concerning late admission and required identification should be followed consistently. Candidates should be apprised of procedures governing checking in and exiting, procedures during a possible emergency, and location and use of restrooms.

Examination instructions should be presented in a clear and straightforward manner, and all candidates should be allowed to ask questions for clarification. The instructions should include procedures for handling claims of examination error but note that candidate questions regarding specific test content that are not appropriate to answer.

Finally, starting and ending times should be identified clearly and enforced stringently. Where possible, a clock displaying the correct time remaining should be available throughout the test and announced periodically, particularly near the conclusion of the test.

After the Test

The testing process continues after the test is administered. The scoring, standard setting, and reporting tasks should be handled in a timely manner, yet be subjected to thorough quality control. Failure to handle these procedures properly can undo all preceding efforts to promote fairness.

Timeliness of reporting test results

Test results should be reported as soon as reasonable after the administration of the test, as professional plans may be contingent on the results. Reporting deadlines listed in the candidate handbook should be met.

Accuracy of scoring

Test scores must accurately reflect candidates' performance on the test. Candidates should be able to request verification of their scores, such as by hand scoring or review of test performance. Scoring alterations as a result of a candidate's identification of an error should be applied to all candidates whose pass-fail status may be affected, not only to the candidate who discovered the error.

Confidentiality of test results

Credentialing/registration boards or their agents should release test results only to the candidate and only in writing. Policies should be in place to ensure that no other individuals or institutions receive the scores identified by candidate name without the candidate's written permission.

Use/misuse of test results

Credentialing/registration boards are responsible to promote the use of results only for their intended purposes. Most credentialing/registration exams are intended to compare a candidate's performance against a standard criterion (i.e., to make a pass/fail decision). Using scores from such an examination to rank order examinees (e.g., for employment selection) is a misuse of that test score.

Information regarding appropriate use of test results should be provided to those who receive the data. Researchers and program evaluators should be made aware of the purpose and design of the test if results are provided to them.

Record retention

Candidates should be made aware of retention policies. Notice should be provided to the candidate if examination performance records will become unavailable after a certain time, as this may affect legal documentation and one's credentialed status. Original documentation of examination performance, such as answer sheets and product fabrications (for practical examinations), should be retained for at least as long as the candidate has a legal right to challenge the examination results. Subsequently, answer sheets and grading forms (for practical examinations) may be stored in archival form (e.g., as microfiche).

Re-examination

Failing candidates should be permitted the opportunity to be re-examined at a future date and should be informed of the procedures for doing so. The test for repeating examinees should be parallel in content and difficulty to the test for first-time candidates and meet the same standards for development and administration.

Repeating examinees should be expected to meet the same test performance standards as first-time examinees, but should not be identified as repeaters at the examination, if possible. If a practical (performance) examination is administered, different examiners than those who evaluated the candidate's prior performance should serve, if possible.

Candidate challenges and appeals

Candidates should be informed in advance of policies related to challenges, comments, and appeals. Once candidates receive their results, it is extremely important to follow and enforce those policies consistently. Refer to the Candidate challenges and appeals section on page 5.

Reporting summary of test results

The credentialing/registration board should provide statistical data highlighting important test outcomes. These data, including overall pass-fail rate (i.e., the percent of candidates who pass) and the number of newly credentialed individuals, should be available to candidates, the public, and the profession.

Endnotes

1. American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, and National Council on Measurement in Education (2014). *Standards for educational and psychological testing*. Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association. (American Educational Research Association, 1430 K Street, NW, Suite 1200, Washington, DC 20005).

2. National Commission for Certifying Agencies (2004). *Standards for the Accreditation of Certification Programs*. Washington, DC: NCCA. (Mailing address: NCCA, 2025 M Street NW Suite 800, Washington DC 20036).

3. Association of Test Publishers (2002). *Guidelines for Computer-Based Testing*. Washington, DC: ATP (Mailing address: ATP, 601 Pennsylvania Ave., N.W. South Building, Suite 900, Washington,

DC 20004).

4. *Code of Fair Testing Practices in Education*. (2004). Washington, DC: Joint Committee on Testing Practices. (Mailing Address: Joint Committee on Testing Practices, Science Directorate, American Psychological Association, 750 First Street, NE, Washington, DC 20002-4242). www.apa.org/science/programs/testing/fair-code.aspx

5. Council on Licensure, Enforcement & Regulation (2015). *Development, Administration, Scoring, and Reporting of Credentialing/registration Examinations: Recommendations for Board Members.* Lexington, KY: CLEAR. (Mailing address: CLEAR, 403 Marquis Ave., Ste. 200, Lexington, KY 40502).

6. Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990, Pub. L. No. 101-336, 104 Stat. 328 (1990). www.ada.gov

7. ADA Amendments Act of 2008, Pub. L. No. 110-325 (2008).

8. Canadian Human Rights Act, R.S.C., (1985), c. H-6

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Principles of Fairness is a product of the contributions of many individuals. The first joint organizational meeting for this project, an open session held at the mid-year CLEAR meeting in January 1992, was attended by the following individuals from both organizations. These individuals provided direction for the structure and content of the document.

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