

CHAPTER 1

Where it began

A short history of social work regulation

As regulated professionals, social workers are fairly recent arrivals on the scene. Although 2019 marked the 120th anniversary of the social work profession in the United States, the regulatory structures guiding the profession are not as old, having their beginnings in legislation enacted in Puerto Rico in 1934. The oldest social work legislation still in use in Canada is the Act to Incorporate the Manitoba Institute of Registered Social Workers, enacted in 1966. Real growth in legislation in the United States began in the late 1960s and early 1970s, while most of Canada’s provinces passed their legislation in the 1990s.

In both countries, this growth could not be described as the smooth expansion of a uniform regulatory system. The history of the legal regulation of social work is one of starts and stops, steps forward and steps backward, victories, defeats, and compromises, all of which play a role in the patchwork of social work regulation in place today.

Social work’s relatively late entry into regulation can in large part be attributed to the debate—which some would argue still goes on—over whether social work is in fact a “profession” in the truest sense of the word. Although most social workers (and social work regulators) today are in solid agreement that social work is truly a profession, this debate has lingered and has tended to slow wide public (and thus legislative) acceptance and understanding of the profession *as a profession*. Remnants of this debate can still be found in some jurisdictions, which still allow the term “social worker” to be applied to certain employees in certain job settings, regardless of their training and overall competence.

Despite these issues, the overall health of social work regulation in the United States and Canada is very good. The number of legally regulated social workers is on the rise—the Association of Social Work Boards estimates that there are more than 500,000 licensed or registered social workers across the United States and Canada—and regulatory boards are regulating multiple professional license categories in increasing numbers. The licensure examinations used by ASWB member boards are valid and reliable measures of competence. And perhaps most encouraging, legislatures, the public, and social workers themselves are coming to understand that professional regulation needs to be rooted in the principles of public protection and not in the enhancement of professional status. Although social work may have been a latecomer in terms of its regulatory development, it has already passed some “older” regulated professions in its responsiveness to the public.

It is possible to trace professional regulation in the United States to 17th century laws that regulated physicians’ fees, but the beginning of professional regulation in the states is most often associated

with professional societies that developed in the early 19th century in medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, and veterinary medicine. These societies sought to establish standards in practice and education and were sometimes able to persuade state legislatures to adopt these standards into law.

These groups followed a more or less standard evolution into a legislatively enacted regulatory structure. They began by creating a voluntary organization (sometimes called a guild, union, society, or other such term) to establish a kind of professional self-consciousness; they worked to develop standards for education in the profession; they developed education accreditation mechanisms; and they (successfully) pressed for governmental certification or licensure of professionals meeting certain educational and experience standards.

Social work regulation in the United States followed roughly the same pattern, beginning in the early part of the 20th century. Bruce A. Thyer and Marilyn Biggerstaff, in their monograph titled *Professional Social Work Credentialing and Legal Regulation* (Springfield, IL: Charles Thomas Publishers, 1989) identified stages of development:

The beginning recognition of a social worker or “friendly visitor” was through an agency on the basis of employment. During the second stage, competency for practice was recognized as holding a graduate-level degree in social work. The third stage was marked by the slow emergence of certification through a professional organization setting minimum standards for practice. During the fourth stage, credentialing began through establishment of statutory requirements primarily on a voluntary basis for the state-regulated practice. (page 13)

Although the first social work regulatory legislation was introduced in California in 1929, the state’s legislature defeated the bill. Legislation did not reemerge in California until 1945, when California adopted a registration system. In the meantime, Puerto Rico had enacted a statute in 1934, making it the first U.S. jurisdiction to adopt a system for the legal regulation of social workers.

During the 1940s and through the 1950s, legislative activity remained fairly quiet. The real upsurge in regulation came in the 1960s, ’70s, and ’80s, when 8, 14, and 27 states enacted social work regulation, respectively. Today, all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, the U.S. territories of the Virgin Islands and Guam, and the U.S. Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands have some form of social work regulation in place.

Moving through the ’90s and after, states began amending their laws to include multiple categories of licensure. In the “Licensing” entry in the *Encyclopedia of Social Work* (2013), former ASWB executive director Donna DeAngelis and former president Amanda Duffy Randall described the continuing growth of “a hodgepodge of different structures for regulating social work.”

The pattern of legislative development in Canada was similar, evolving over a period of more than 65 years. Early efforts to gain legislative recognition began within the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) in 1938, although the first social work law in Canada was not enacted until 1966, in Manitoba. With the passing of the Social Work and Social Service Work Act (S.O. 1998) in Ontario, all 10 provinces have social work practice legislation.

According to the “Licensing” article in the encyclopedia, at present, “Legislation in each jurisdiction in the United States and Canada defines the qualifications and educational requirements for social workers, and specifies the activities associated with social work practice at the baccalaureate, master’s, and clinical levels.”

The Association of Social Work Boards

As social work licensing spread in the United States during the 1970s, a group of social workers who were mostly members of early regulatory boards saw the need for an organization whose primary concern would be social work regulation. The group of early regulators felt that this association would need to stand apart from any professional organization and should be focused primarily on licensure as a public protection issue.

The Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) was incorporated in 1979 as the American Association of State Social Work Boards (AASSWB). Composed of regulatory boards that oversee social work, ASWB membership now includes 50 states, the District of Columbia, the U.S. territories of the Virgin Islands and Guam, the U.S. Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, and all 10 Canadian provinces. In 1999, the association changed its name to the Association of Social Work Boards to reflect both its changing membership and the growing importance of social work regulation internationally.

ASWB’s mission is to provide support and services to the social work regulatory community to advance safe, competent, and ethical practices to strengthen public protection. The association owns and maintains the licensing examinations used in 50 states, Washington, D.C., the Virgin Islands, and five Canadian provinces. It also manages a database of disciplinary actions member boards have taken against social workers. The association works with other regulatory board associations, professional social work organizations, social work educators, and social workers themselves to increase understanding of the legal regulation of social work. A goal that is a constant is to promote consistency in regulation, so that social workers can more easily move from jurisdiction to jurisdiction and use technology to provide services.

Throughout this manual, you will learn more about the ways in which ASWB helps regulatory boards and their members.

Regulation - still evolving

While social work regulation across the United States and Canada is more widespread than at any time in its history, the regulation of the practice is still evolving. Laws and regulations continue to change, and the work to attain consistent regulation and licensure is ongoing.

Perhaps the most difficult issue that needs to be discussed is also one of the most basic—the relationship between a profession and its regulatory mechanisms. The existence of legal regulation of social work in the United States is a result of the efforts of social workers. It also owes much to the social work professional association, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and its state chapters, as well as to other professional social work groups.

It was, after all, social workers who saw the need for the establishment of standards. It was social workers who pressed for the development of a single standardized examination program. It was, very often, social workers who were instrumental in drafting licensing laws and advocating for their passage, and it is, of course, social workers who comprise the majority of social work regulatory boards.

Historically, NASW worked very hard for licensure. Another professional association, then known as the National Federation of Societies for Clinical Social Work, was also involved, even to the extent of an early '80s gift of \$1,000 to help ASWB get the examination under way. Even today, social workers and state professional associations are the frontline defenders of licensure laws that come under the attack of legislators seeking to eliminate “unnecessary” regulation. These contributions should never be ignored.

At the same time, however, in order for licensing laws and regulatory boards to function properly, it must be remembered that professional regulation’s primary mission is public protection. The public—consumers of social work services—must always come first; the needs of the social work profession must be secondary. Social workers who view regulation as a way to protect and promote the profession of social work are correct, but only in an indirect way: The profession of social work is best served when its governmental regulatory arm is devoted to public protection. When consumers and legislatures are convinced that the social work board is acting as an advocate for public protection, the profession of social work gains respect and trust.

Social workers and their professional associations are rightly concerned with the continued health of their profession and should work to promote and spread knowledge and understanding of the value of social work. Social work regulatory boards, although they are made up primarily of professional social workers, must have a different focus. Tensions will inevitably develop between the professional and regulatory communities, but this is actually a good thing; it helps to ensure that both the profession and its regulatory components are strong.

Similar tensions should exist between the social work regulation and social work education communities—that of the inevitable differences between practice and theory. The licensing examinations should not be construed as outcome measures of academic programs, nor should academic programs be overly concerned with teaching only the knowledge required to pass an examination for licensure. Social work educational programs need to have the freedom to teach a range and depth of knowledge beyond the minimum competencies demanded by licensure. In the same way, the regulatory community should maintain its focus on actual practice and the skills needed to practice competently and safely.

These three pillars of social work—the professional community, the academic community, and the regulatory community—must continually work to understand the extent of common areas and differences. There will always be common areas, and there will always be differences. Fortunately, social work is a profession that embraces diversity, acknowledges honest differences, and uses the differences to build a stronger whole. Effective professional regulation is a part of that stronger whole.



Core Values

Respect

Accountability

Integrity

Service

Excellence

CHAPTER 2

ASWB

Your association – how it works, what it does

When ASWB (at that time AASSWB—the American Association of State Social Work Boards) began in 1979, its founders were hopeful that the organization could work toward creating an examination that could be used by a few licensing boards. Within 20 years, the association had accomplished that and much more. The licensing examination program remains at the center of the association. Today, the Association of Social Work Boards provides five examinations used in the United States and Canada, a comprehensive and reliable database of disciplinary actions taken by U.S. and Canadian boards, a continuing education provider approval program, and many other examination services. ASWB has grown into a strong international organization that helps social work regulatory boards carry out their work effectively and creatively and that provides information to assist boards as they work toward consistency in regulation across jurisdictions.

ASWB’s mission and vision

The focus of ASWB has always been on consumer protection first. By helping to encourage more consistency in regulation, by facilitating the sharing of information among boards, and by providing a valid, reliable examination, ASWB assists its member boards in protecting the public.

The mission of ASWB is to:

Provide support and services to the social work regulatory community to advance safe, competent, and ethical practice to strengthen public protection.

This mission is accompanied by the following vision statement: All social workers are licensed in order to protect clients and client systems.

An association of boards

The Association of Social Work Boards is, at its core, an organization made up of its member boards. Boards, through their delegates, set broad association policy, elect ASWB leadership, and make important decisions about the overall direction and positions of the organization. Because ASWB is driven by its member boards, boards can collectively develop and use programs that might be too costly or labor-intensive for any single regulatory body. Examination programs, for example, are highly complex, expensive operations that require constant maintenance. For most boards, mounting

a defensible examination program would be impossible. Through ASWB, however, boards can have access to and control over a valid and defensible examination program, a program that provides consistency that strengthens regulation.

Similarly, other programs—such as the ASWB Approved Continuing Education (ACE) program, the Social Work Registry, the Public Protection Database/reporting to the U.S. National Practitioner Data Bank, and the association’s application processing and continuing education audit services—can free boards and their staff from some administrative burdens without “outsourcing” to private agencies that may or may not be responsive and may not share the focus on public protection. Additionally, programs such as New Board Member Training, the Administrators Workshop, and Executive Leadership Training allow boards to carry out their own responsibilities more effectively.

The association’s bylaws provide for an annual education meeting and an annual business meeting.

Governance

The delegate assembly

The Association of Social Work Boards is controlled by its delegate assembly, a governing body made up of one delegate from each member jurisdiction. Delegates meet during the ASWB Annual Meeting of the Delegate

Assembly. At the meeting, the assembly receives reports on various ASWB programs, elects members of the association’s Board of Directors and Nominating Committee, and votes on recommendations and motions brought forward by the Board of Directors, various ASWB committees, or the assembly itself. Each member board gets one vote in the delegate assembly. Most motions require a simple majority to pass.

The delegate assembly has specific powers reserved for it through the ASWB bylaws, but it also has fairly wide latitude to shape association policy and programs. Since 1994, ASWB has funded attendance for one delegate from every jurisdiction that chooses to participate in the ASWB Annual Meeting of the Delegate Assembly, to ensure the most complete participation possible.

The Board of Directors

The ASWB Board of Directors is elected by the delegate assembly and oversees the ongoing business of the association. The Board of Directors consists of 11 members: president, president-elect/past president (alternating years), secretary, treasurer, and seven directors at large.

In 2020, ASWB held the first virtual meeting of the delegate assembly in response to COVID-19.

The ASWB Examination Committee is dedicated to creating exams that measure competence fairly.

At least two directors must be public members, and one at-large seat is reserved for a current staff member of a member board. The association president must be a licensed social worker.

Committees and task forces

The association relies heavily on volunteers to oversee several important elements of the organization. The members of these volunteer committees are appointed by the president after approval from the Board at the beginning of each year, with a few exceptions. Current committees include:

Examination Committee

This committee is responsible for overseeing the questions, or items, on the ASWB examinations. Examination Committee members are carefully selected for ethnic, geographic, and practice setting diversity, and they need not be members of a social work regulatory board. Members of the Examination Committee are drawn from the ASWB item writer program.

Finance Committee

The Finance Committee monitors ASWB revenues and expenditures, and helps the Board of Directors develop policies and procedures to maintain the overall financial health of the organization.

Bylaws and Resolutions Committee

This committee reviews all proposed changes to the ASWB bylaws as well as any resolutions that are forwarded to the delegate assembly. The committee can also draft its own proposals for bylaws amendments.

Nominating Committee.

This elected committee creates the slate of candidates for all elected positions within the association.

Regulation and Standards (RAS) Committee

The RAS Committee's primary responsibility is the continual review of the Model Social Work Practice Act to ensure the model act maintains contemporary application to social work regulation. The committee also monitors emerging issues in social work practice, promotes consistency of regulatory language across jurisdictions, and monitors and encourages board participation in ASWB's Public Protection Database.

Regulatory Education and Leadership (REAL) Committee

The REAL Committee is responsible for developing the programs presented at the ASWB education meeting.

Association office

ASWB is headquartered in Culpeper, Virginia. The staff at the association office are responsible for the daily operations of the association, from supporting volunteers and committee work to registering candidates for the social work licensing exams. The work of the staff is guided by the Board of Directors, by way of the chief executive officer, and through policy.

ASWB services

The range of services provided by the association has expanded to meet the needs of its membership. With the exception of the examination program—the use of which is required by every member that uses an exam—the programs offered by ASWB are voluntary, to be used by each member board as it prefers.

As an extension of the services directly related to its members, ASWB also works to educate social workers, legislators, schools of social work, and the public on issues related to licensure and regulation. This outreach is facilitated through exhibiting and presenting at educational and professional conferences and serving as experts on members' behalf. Topics range from explanations of examination construction to discussions of broad regulatory issues such as licensure exemptions and electronic practice.

There is no cost to member boards for the following services and programs, unless otherwise noted.

Public Protection Database (PPD)

The PPD is a repository of information on U.S. and Canadian regulatory board actions and activities taken relative to licensees and licensure applicants. This cooperative effort among boards has resulted in an effective tool for board use during license application and renewal processes. Boards can use the PPD as a flagging system—particularly when reviewing an application from a social worker previously licensed in another jurisdiction.

NPDB reporting service

The U.S. federal government now requires all health-related regulatory bodies to submit regular disciplinary reports to the National Practitioner Data Bank (NPDB). ASWB has been approved as an official reporting agent for social work boards and can process and forward a member board's reports to the federal system.

Regulatory training and leadership programs

The association offers training sessions intended to help new members of regulatory boards become familiar with their roles, the responsibilities of the regulatory board,

and the ways in which ASWB can help. Programs are also offered for member board administrative staff and board chairs to help them understand their roles. These trainings have been developed over the years based on member needs and requests. Attendance is funded by ASWB for a limited number of participants at each session.

ASWB maintains information of interest to members and stakeholders on its [website](#) and on [MovingSocialWork.org](#). Resources ASWB staff use for presenting are available to members who may want to present at their local conferences.

ASWB Approved Continuing Education (ACE) program

The ASWB ACE program helps boards, continuing education providers, and social workers by standardizing continuing education approval and identifying high-quality continuing education providers and individual courses. ACE approval from ASWB is an acknowledgment of course quality or a CE provider's qualifications to present, monitor, and maintain quality social work continuing education offerings. Boards use ACE approval status in a variety of ways, from accepting all CE offered by ACE providers to using ACE approval as one factor in reviews of CE.

Joint Accreditation collaboration

ASWB is an affiliate member of the Joint Accreditation collaborative, which allows participating providers of inter-professional continuing education to extend their offerings to social workers on the health care team and use the ACE logo in their credit listings.

ASWB Social Work Registry

The Social Work Registry was designed as a repository for social worker credential information and to serve as a verification source for social work boards. ASWB is integrating the Registry into the applications platform being developed to provide member boards streamlined access to ASWB services, including access to documentation for social workers enrolled in the Registry.

Continuing education audit service

The association is available to conduct audits of licensee continuing education compliance for purposes of license renewal. Contracts for this service are created to fit the individual needs of member boards.

Application processing/Preapproval

The association can serve as a screening service for preapproval to sit for the exams, processing of initial licensure applications, and the issuance (after member board approval) of final licensure documents and notification. Contracts for this service are created to fit the individual needs of member boards.

Model Social Work Practice Act

The model act is a resource designed to provide regulatory boards with a practice act that draws on best practices. The ASWB Model Social Work Practice Act contains laws, regulations, and accompanying explanations that can help boards that are attempting to amend their own laws and regulations.

ASWB website

The association's website (aswb.org) supplies visitors with extensive information on social work regulation and the examinations. The ASWB website places special emphasis on providing information about the exams and how they measure competence fairly, licensure and regulatory data from every state and province, and continuing education and license renewal.

MovingSocialWork.org

A website dedicated to
sharing practice mobility
news and resources

Administrators email group

Staff of regulatory boards may participate in an ASWB-sponsored email group that encourages discussion of issues and the sharing of information electronically. To join the administrators email group, contact ASWB at csanner@aswb.org.

Education meeting

The annual education meeting allows members of social work regulatory boards to participate in programs delivered by internationally recognized speakers, as well as by leaders within ASWB. Past meeting topics have included social work ethics, supervision, electronic practice, practice mobility, and working with legislators.

Administrators Forum

These meetings, scheduled twice a year in person to coincide with the education meeting and Annual Meeting of the Delegate Assembly, provide an opportunity for social work board administrators to discuss mutual concerns and interests and share ideas. Virtual meetings may be scheduled throughout the year to discuss regulatory issues.

Board Member Exchange

These meetings support regulatory leadership development of ASWB member board members through the sharing of experiences and mentoring. Regulatory education and problem-solving may also be included. In-person meetings take place twice a year, at the education meeting and the Annual Meeting of the Delegate Assembly. Additional meetings may be held virtually throughout the year.

Governance as Leadership

This session gives members an opportunity to learn more about leadership roles with ASWB and nonprofit governance, including committee functions, elected positions, and the work of the ASWB Board of Directors.

Social media

ASWB maintains a presence on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, and Linked In to increase outreach and quickly disseminate information to exam candidates and other stakeholders.

ASWB publications

The association offers a range of publications on different topics. These include:

association news. A bimonthly e-newsletter that keeps member boards up to date on happenings within the association and throughout the regulatory community.

Model Regulatory Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice. These standards were developed to help guide social work regulators as they consider how to embrace technology and regulate its use in social work practice.

Technology Standards for Social Work Practice. The standards for technology in social work practice were written through the collaboration of NASW, CSWE, the Clinical Social Work Association, and ASWB after publication of ASWB's Model Regulatory Standards for Technology in Social Work Practice. The practice standards, published by NASW, are complementary to the regulatory technology standards and provide guidance for social work professionals.

Social work laws and regs database. This online database, found at aswb.org, contains information on every social work regulatory board in the United States and Canada.

Legislative updates. ASWB subscribes to U.S. state-based research services to monitor and track proposed regulatory and legislative changes that can affect social work professional regulation. This online tool is available to ASWB members and stakeholders.

Keep your board from riding off into the sunset. Regulatory boards facing so-called “sunset” provisions in the United States can use this online publication to help them prepare for the review process.

Legislative resources. To support members' education and advocacy efforts, ASWB has prepared talking points about social work regulation topics. ASWB is always willing to add topics upon request. ASWB will also submit letters supporting regulation of social work to legislatures upon request.

Informational brochures. ASWB produces a variety of brochures on different topics, ranging from the basics of licensure to advice to social workers seeking continuing education to brochures about the role of regulation in public protection.

Curricular Guide for Licensing and Regulation. This guide was developed through the collaboration of CSWE, NASW Insurance Group RRG, and ASWB to explain how licensing and regulation relate to the nine competencies required for social work program accreditation by CSWE. The guide, published by CSWE, is available to all social work faculty and includes in-class activities, assignments, and field experiences designed to help students understand the impact of licensing on their social work practice.

Exam guide and online practice tests. For candidates preparing for the social work examinations, the association publishes the *ASWB Guide to the Social Work Exams*, as well as full-scale online practice tests for the Associate, Bachelors, Masters, and Clinical examinations.

Group review practice tests. The association offers sets of sample test questions for use by accredited social work education programs in group instructional settings.

The social work licensing examinations

The licensing examinations developed by ASWB are the single most important service provided by the association. Each year, the association devotes more than 50 percent of its budget to examination development and maintenance. Hundreds of volunteer and staff hours are devoted each year to keeping the ASWB examinations valid and reliable measures of social work competence.

The ASWB examinations are called high-stakes examinations for good reason: In order to become licensed and call themselves social workers (pursuing their chosen profession), candidates for licensure must pass the exam. Because boards rely on these examinations to help them make decisions in the interest of public protection, the construction, validation, and maintenance of the testing program are extremely important.

The basics – testing format and delivery

The ASWB examination program is one of the larger health care licensure testing systems, with a volume that has grown to exceed 50,000 administrations annually. The ASWB examinations are the only social work licensing examinations with a U.S./Canada scope and standardized passing scores.

The ASWB examinations are offered in five categories:

- Associate, targeted at applicants without a social work degree, offered in a few jurisdictions
- Bachelors, appropriate for BSWs with 0–2 years of experience
- Masters, for use by MSWs with 0–2 years of experience
- Advanced Generalist, for MSWs with 2–5 years of post-degree experience in non-clinical settings
- Clinical, for MSWs with 2–5 years of post-degree experience in clinical settings

Each exam consists of 170 multiple-choice items, 20 of which are nonscored pretest items. Test-takers have four hours to complete the examination. Content outlines for all exam categories are found on aswb.org.

The association works with a testing contractor that provides psychometric and administration support services. Tests are administered at more than 225 testing sites worldwide. Candidates take the exam on computers in the test centers. They receive unofficial score reports with their unofficial pass/fail status at the conclusion of their exam. Official score reports are sent to jurisdictions each week.

At present, five Canadian jurisdictions—Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Saskatchewan—use the examinations. Others are in the planning process.

The watchwords – validity and reliability

The main challenge to a licensure testing program is to find the theoretical line that separates those who are *minimally* competent at entry to practice from those who are not. Legal regulation's focus is on making determinations that protect the public from incompetent practice—regulatory bodies cannot restrict licenses to only those practitioners who demonstrate excellence, because excellence and competence are different concepts. In turn, licensing examinations must be able to measure *minimum* competency and must be able to do so consistently—they must, in other words, be **valid** and **reliable**. Validity and reliability are intertwined terms that, together, establish the legal defensibility of a testing program.

Validity, as it is used in licensing examination programs, refers to the extent to which a test measures what it is supposed to be measuring and the test's ability to ensure that minimally competent candidates are passing the examination and that minimally incompetent candidates are not passing. Validity is accomplished primarily through the way the test is constructed and the method by which passing scores are set. The central component of the ASWB examination program's overall validity rests with the practice analysis process (see next section).

Reliability is a function of the tests after they have been constructed. It refers to the consistency of an examination. A highly reliable test is one that produces similar scores for each test-taker time after time. The reliability of the ASWB examinations is maintained through its test development efforts and the statistical monitoring of individual item (test question) and candidate performance.

Together, validity and reliability are the foundation for the examination program's legal defensibility as a fair and consistent tool to help boards make minimum competence decisions as part of the licensure process.

Constructing the examinations—the practice analysis

The ASWB examinations are based on periodic practice analyses. The practice analysis begins with a survey of social work practice in a wide variety of settings across the United States and Canada. Its results shape the actual questions that appear on the examinations, as well as the need for a particular examination at a particular category of practice. From the job analysis, ASWB finds out what social workers are doing at various categories of practice.

The practice analysis survey lists a series of tasks common to social work. Participants are asked to rate how often they perform each task; how critical knowledge of the task is, regardless of how often it is performed; and whether the ability to perform the task is a necessary entry-level skill at their particular category of practice. The results give ASWB a highly accurate profile of social work and help the association to establish the various categories of examinations offered. The entire job analysis is based on standards set out in the Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing developed by the American Educational Research Association, the American Psychological Association, and the National Council on Measurement in Education.

ASWB conducted its first practice analysis in 1980–81, with a practice analysis verification study completed in 1988. The next practice analyses were completed in 1996, 2003, and 2009. The sixth and most current practice analysis began in 2015, and results were reflected on the exams beginning in January 2018. The next practice analysis will get under way in 2021.

After survey results have been compiled and tabulated, subject matter experts sift through the ratings and identify those tasks critical to entry-level practice. Once the most important tasks have been identified, content experts target the knowledge areas that are essential to performing a particular task. Usually, several knowledge areas are attached to any one task, reflecting the complexity of social work practice.

With task and knowledge areas defined, content outlines—also called examination blueprints—are created. The content outline is the skeletal version of the examination itself, with content headings

and subheadings indicating the percentage of items relating to each topic. These content outlines, one for each category of the ASWB examinations, are built on the results of the practice analysis and guide all item development. The blueprints for the current exams went online in 2017.

In the final step, examinations are created to fit the blueprints, and passing scores (or cut scores) are set using a psychometric process called a modified Angoff method. In this method, social work experts review examination questions on the basis of the abilities of a “minimally competent” practitioner. Each expert then makes decisions on the probability that this practitioner will answer questions correctly. The judgments are averaged, and the averages are used to compute a recommended cut score for the examination as a whole.

The 2003 practice analysis was the first to incorporate data from the Canadian provinces. Analyses comparing the results from the United States and Canada demonstrated a high level of commonality and led to ASWB’s decision to create a unified content outline and passing score for all test-takers at each examination category. The 2009 and 2015 practice analyses also substantiated the appropriateness of the ASWB examinations for use throughout the United States and Canada.

Test development

For each category of examination, ASWB maintains a bank of questions, or items, coded to specific content areas. These items are written by social work practitioners across the United States and Canada who have been contracted to write for various areas of practice. The item writers are selected by the association to ensure an appropriate representation of practice, ethnic, racial, and geographic diversity. Writers chosen are trained in the fine points of item writing.

Once created and edited, items are presented to the ASWB Examination Committee. This committee is an essential element in the continued health of the examination program and, like the item writing group, is carefully selected to reflect the diversity of the social work profession. At each of its meetings, the Examination Committee reviews items for possible inclusion on the examinations as “pretest” items—the audition that every item receives as a nonscored question on an ASWB examination.

Every item approved for use in the ASWB item pool is coded and statistically tracked, both during its pretest phase and through its use as a scored item. Before any item can be included in the pool of standard scored items, it must perform acceptably as a nonscored pretest item. There are 20 pretest items on every ASWB examination, mixed in with regular scored items. All pretest items must have several hundred responses before a statistical analysis of its function is meaningful.

The statistical tracking also allows ASWB to attach a difficulty rating to each question. The ratings play an important role in the way the examinations are scored. They allow ASWB to create multiple versions of an examination while keeping overall difficulty constant. (See “equating” next.)

To maintain a high level of security, ASWB creates several versions of each examination, called forms, with different items testing the same content. Examination candidates are tracked and linked to specific forms, so that a failed candidate who retakes the test will never be presented with the same version of an examination.

Equating - keeping the difficulty consistent

When examination forms are created, the individual difficulty levels of the items are accounted for in the passing score for that particular form. Put simply, it is quite possible that any given combination of items will result in a test that is more or less difficult than another form. But passing scores on individual forms are calibrated to the same level of difficulty as the original form on which the anchor score was set. The passing score adjustments mean that, in the end, passing each test requires the same level of overall ability, even though questions may vary. The process for accounting for differences in overall difficulty is known as equating.

This statistical/psychometric process is of course not apparent to test-takers, except that equating makes it impossible to establish an unchanging number of items that need to be answered correctly in order to pass every form of each category of ASWB examination. Candidates taking one form of the examination may have to answer more or fewer questions correctly than candidates taking another form. These variations—typically very slight—are accounted for in the passing score set for each form.

Fair testing policies

The social work licensing examinations are intended to be measures of social work knowledge and not tests of reading, deduction, or the values of one culture over another. To guard against overly complex language, all examination items are thoroughly edited for simplicity and straightforward language; jargon is eliminated wherever possible, and readability tests are conducted on the examinations. The 2019 readability study indicated the exams reflected a 10th grade reading level—more difficult than a newspaper but less challenging than the standard social work texts used in most BSW and MSW programs.

Cultural bias is also monitored closely. The association takes steps to guard against this bias by including diverse participants in every phase of examination development and item writing. Further, individual test items are monitored for the presence of differential item functioning (DIF), or the tendency for one subgroup of test-takers to answer the item in ways that are disproportionate. When consistent DIF is identified in an item—usually in pretest items that are being tested for possible scored use—the item is deleted from the item bank.

ASWB is also sensitive to the special needs of test-takers. Long before the United States adopted the Americans With Disabilities Act, the association was providing accommodations to candidates with disabilities. Such accommodations continue today, ranging from audiotape and Braille examinations to the provision of readers and sign language interpreters. There are also allowances for extra time in which to complete the examination. Jurisdictions permitting, ASWB also makes arrangements for test-takers whose primary language is something other than English. Typically, English as a second language (ESL) candidates are allowed the use of up to two dictionaries (one of which may be a standard English dictionary), and additional time to complete the test.