

## Enhancing Belonging, Access and Opportunity in the Social Work Licensing and Credentialing Process

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**Abstract:** *This paper examines the critical need for enhancing belonging, access, and opportunity within the social work licensing and credentialing process. Recent analyses have revealed significant disparities in pass rates for licensing exams among underrepresented groups, including African American, Latinx, and older social work candidates. These inequities raise ethical concerns and challenge the foundational values of the social work profession, which is rooted in principles of social justice and empowerment. By analyzing structural barriers and biases within the licensing process, this paper identifies key areas for reform, including the need for inclusive exam content, cultural competence training for test developers, and comprehensive support systems for non-traditional candidates. Furthermore, the paper explores how technology and artificial intelligence can play a transformative role in addressing DEI issues, such as bias detection, personalized learning experiences, and improved accessibility for diverse candidates. Ultimately, the paper argues that a commitment to DEI in the licensing process is not only a moral imperative but also essential for fostering a social work profession that truly reflects and serves the diverse communities it aims to support. By implementing targeted reforms and leveraging technological innovations, the profession can advance its ethical mission and promote equity on the path to licensure.*

**Keywords:** *Social work licensure, licensure reform, equity and inclusion, ethics*

Licensing and credentialing of social workers has been an ongoing topic of discussion since the release of the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) pass rate analysis in 2022. According to the ASWB 2022 report, the overall pass rate for the social work licensing exam was 75% for first-time test-takers (ASWB, 2022). However, pass rates varied significantly among racial and ethnic groups, with African American candidates having a pass rate of around 60%, while White candidates passed at a rate of approximately 82% (ASWB, 2022). While the social work profession is grounded in principles of social justice, equity, and inclusion, more recent research has challenged the profession's stance. Significant concerns have been raised regarding the social work licensing and credentialing process, particularly its impact on underrepresented groups. The social work profession is responsible for holding all relevant stakeholders accountable for their participation in structural systems of oppression. It is the goal that the social work profession will work persistently to address these challenges.

Research indicates that African American, Latinx, and older social work candidates have lower pass rates on licensing exams compared to their White counterparts, highlighting potential inequities in the system (Kim, 2022). Furthermore, microaggressions and racial privilege in the exam process contribute to these disparities, further

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marginalizing candidates from underrepresented backgrounds (Castex et al., 2018). Ethical concerns surrounding these inequities call for a re-examination of the licensing process to ensure integrity and fairness (Joseph, 2024). There is an urgent necessity to investigate methods for revealing these discrepancies and to analyze solutions that promote reassurance in deconstructing the injustices associated with social work licensing examinations.

### **Ethical Implications**

The commitment to diversity and inclusion in the social work licensing and credentialing process is deeply rooted in the core ethical principles and values outlined by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics (NASW, 2021). These principles not only guide practitioners in their daily work but also serve as a foundation for creating a more equitable and just system within the profession. The ethical principle of service emphasizes the importance of putting others' needs first, particularly those who are vulnerable or oppressed (NASW, 2021). In the context of the licensing exam, this principle calls for a process that acknowledges and supports candidates from diverse backgrounds, ensuring they have the resources and opportunities to succeed. By prioritizing the needs of underrepresented groups, the profession can better fulfill its mission of serving all individuals and communities.

A cornerstone of social work ethics, the principle of social justice, compels social workers to challenge social injustices and advocate for marginalized populations (NASW, 2021). The licensing exam should reflect this commitment by eliminating biases and barriers that disproportionately affect candidates of color, economically disadvantaged individuals, and other marginalized groups. Ensuring fair access to licensure is a critical step in promoting equity within the profession and the communities it serves. This ethical value underscores the importance of respecting the inherent dignity and worth of all individuals. In the licensing process, this principle supports the need for a fair evaluation that recognizes the diverse experiences and backgrounds of candidates. A culturally competent examination process respects candidates as whole individuals and affirms their right to equitable treatment and opportunity.

Social workers are expected to act with integrity, demonstrating honesty and transparency in their practices. The current disparities in licensing exam pass rates raise ethical concerns about the fairness and transparency of the exam process. By addressing biases and ensuring that the exam accurately measures competence, licensing boards can uphold the integrity of the profession and the trust placed in it by society. The principle of competence requires social workers to maintain and enhance their professional knowledge and skills. In the context of the licensing process, this entails ensuring that the exam adequately prepares candidates to meet the needs of diverse populations. By incorporating culturally relevant content and assessing real-world skills, the exam can better evaluate candidates' readiness to serve in a diverse society (NASW, 2021).

### **Disparities in the Licensing Process**

Although the social work profession is grounded in principles of empowerment of individuals who are oppressed, the licensing exam contradicts these sentiments. Social work students that come into the field from communities that are disproportionately affected by poverty often seek social work licensure to escape oppression. Unfortunately, for many the licensing exam exists as another roadblock due to bias and various disparities. According to Joseph (2024), it is critical to address not only the structural barriers that create inequities in the licensing process, but also the ethical obligations of licensing bodies to maintain fairness, transparency, and integrity in the development of exams. Social work graduates from communities that are economically disadvantaged are repeating the licensing exam multiple times and consequently bear the financial burden of the cost each time (Nienow et al., 2022). Many of these individuals are from specific racial and ethnic minority groups which are already plagued with societal challenges. The lack of fairness in access to licensure undermines the ethical foundations of the profession, and it calls for reforms that prioritize equity for all candidates.

Historically, restrictions on the licensing exam pass rate data have sparked concerns about racial inequities due to the lack of transparency (Nienow et al., 2022). We cannot address inequities without understanding their underlying causes. Social workers of color are experiencing challenges at an alarming rate, as the licensing exam pass rate data revealed (Bloxom & Anderson, 2024). Individuals from traditionally marginalized communities continue to face barriers due to racially biased licensing exams. Beyond culturally biased exam questions, additional barriers and challenges exist, including stereotyping, limited access and limited means to afford test preparation resources, and systemic educational inequities (Wasserberg, 2017). Additionally, according to the research, the ASWB licensing exam is implicitly traumatizing and oppressing individuals from under-resourced communities who strive to obtain a college degree and pass the required exams to improve their circumstances (Bloxom & Anderson, 2024). Specifically, Black social workers experience racism at an alarming rate in the profession and have been met with ongoing workplace inequities, even with the attainment of a college degree (Beadlescomb, 2019; Obasi, 2021). Although students from diverse backgrounds complete their social work degrees, there is still a hurdle to overcome with the licensing exam.

Apgar and Nienow (2023) acknowledge the licensing examination for social workers as a mechanism for gatekeeping in the social work profession, however, the ASWB falls short at ensuring the exam is adequately measuring competence of individuals who pass. Castex et al. (2018) discusses the licensing exam through the lens of a critical race theorist and acknowledges the ASWB licensing exam as a “racial societal barrier” (p. 215). The ASWB is tasked with ensuring exam questions are analyzed for bias and any potentially biased questions are supposed to be removed (Nienow et al., 2022). Beadlescomb (2019) encourages empowerment theory as a means of fostering inclusion in social workspaces, particularly in academia. However, it is important to also recognize areas of professional development, including licensing test preparation, as a space to foster inclusion in navigating differences in learning styles and testing styles (Beadlescomb, 2019).

Licensing remains a hindrance for social workers who graduate from accredited institutions but are unable to perform in the field without passing the requisite examination for licensed status (Apgar, 2022). Moreover, the ongoing investigation into the disparities between social work educational programs accredited by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) and the licensing examination endorsed by the ASWB underscores the inconsistencies within the profession, as graduates of accredited programs may not be adequately prepared to succeed in their licensing examination. Regrettably, it remains true that there is no clear correlation between the accreditation of social work education and social work licensure examinations (Nienow et al., 2022). Social work programs require enhanced checks and balances to establish criteria pertinent to the social work exam, thereby adequately preparing graduates for licensure, as this remains a prerequisite for demonstrating minimum proficiency in the profession. Alternative measures are needed to address the continued disparities in the licensing and credentialing process for social workers.

### **Practice Implications**

While the emergence of research related to bias in the social work licensing and credentialing process continues to reinforce structural concerns in the social work profession, reformation is essential. One of the most critical areas of reform is ensuring that the content of social work licensing exams reflects the diverse populations social workers serve. Current exams often emphasize Western models of practice and theory, which may not resonate with candidates from different cultural or socioeconomic backgrounds. Using an intersectional lens can aid test takers in becoming more aware of inequities that are based on intersecting experiences of oppression and begin deconstructing oppressive systems (Bloxom & Anderson, 2024). As addressed below, various scholars explore strategies that support the enhancement of diversity, equity and inclusion in the social work licensing and credentialing process.

#### **Diversifying Test Content**

One strategy for licensing bodies is to diversify exam content to ensure it is more inclusive by incorporating questions that reflect the diverse cultural, racial, and socioeconomic contexts in which social workers practice. This could include scenarios that explore different cultural approaches to mental health, family dynamics, and community support. Additionally, the exam can incorporate scenarios that align with social justice concerns that may be unique to specific communities that have experienced disadvantages due to racial or economic injustices. Such inclusiveness in exam content would not only make the exam more relevant for a broader range of candidates, but also better prepare social workers to address complex social justice issues and serve diverse clients (Quzack et al., 2021).

### **Cultural Competence Training for Test Developers**

Ensuring that test developers and item writers are trained in cultural competence is another important strategy. Having exam questions written and reviewed by individuals with expertise in diversity, equity and inclusion is one step in the process towards potentially reducing biased or culturally insensitive questions. This could help eliminate test items that unfairly disadvantage candidates from underrepresented groups (Castex et al., 2018). Individuals from communities that are traditionally marginalized may be plagued with trauma that impacts their ability to test or may encounter triggers during testing due to stigmatizing or discriminatory test questions. Therefore, by ensuring test developers are culturally aware of bias and microaggressions that could develop during the creation of test items, these questions and answers can be acknowledged as inappropriate and removed. Ethical concerns arise when licensing exams fail to account for the diverse realities of practice. The ASWB has an ethical obligation to ensure equity in licensure exams and to ensure exam content is relevant, accessible, and fair to all candidates, regardless of their background (Joseph, 2024).

### **Support for Non-Traditional and Underrepresented Candidates**

Non-traditional students and those from underrepresented groups often face unique barriers in preparing for and passing the social work licensing exam (Miller et al., 2015). These candidates may include older individuals, people of color, immigrants, and first-generation college students, all of whom may face financial, technological, or linguistic challenges. Offering test preparation and licensing examinations in additional languages will aid in the expansion of accessibility and inclusivity. Currently, the ASWB only offers the social work licensing examination in English. Test takers can complete an accommodation form for additional exam testing time and to allow the use of a bilingual word-to-word dictionary without definitions (ASWB, 2025). However, if diversity and equity are to be respected, the exam should be available in other languages.

For candidates for whom English is not a first language, offering exams in multiple languages or providing linguistic support could significantly improve access. Similarly, accommodating individuals with disabilities through specialized testing environments or extended time limits is essential for ensuring fairness and equity in the licensing process (Lovett, 2021). Ethically, ensuring that all candidates have access to the resources they need to succeed in the licensing process is a core principle of fairness. Without this support, many candidates from underrepresented backgrounds are unfairly disadvantaged (Joseph, 2024).

### **Affordable and Accessible Test Preparation**

The financial obligation of funding licensing examination preparation and the licensing process several times per licensure level can result in an overwhelming load. Wilfong (2024) discussed the pay inequalities in the social work profession and need for reform. An individual who has been in the field for several years may have the financial resources to cover the cost of the exam. However, the cost could be a barrier for new graduates and

entry level social workers. There could be a scholarship offering if test takers are experiencing financial hardship.

Providing affordable and accessible test preparation resources is crucial for leveling the playing field. Licensing boards, social work organizations, and nonprofit organizations could partner with educational institutions to offer low-cost or free study materials, tutoring, and workshops specifically geared toward candidates from underrepresented groups and integrated into the social work curriculum (Miller et al., 2015). This will also eliminate the need for external funds to pay for test preparation as it will be embedded in the current tuition cost. Online resources and virtual preparation programs would also ensure that individuals from rural areas or those with time constraints can access support. Ultimately, exploring various methods of test preparation and funding to alleviate the financial burden for those with financial based needs provides equitable options to address licensing and credentialing concerns.

### **Mentorship and Peer Support Networks**

Mentorship is defined as a two-way relationship and type of human development in which someone invests personal knowledge, energy, and time to help another person grow and develop and improve. This process is beneficial to the mentee and the mentor. The mentee can experience personal growth and development, career guidance and satisfaction, and increased academic productivity (Henry-Noel, 2018). Mentorship programs that pair experienced licensed social workers with candidates from underrepresented groups can provide valuable guidance, emotional support, and practical tips for navigating the exam process. Peer support networks, where candidates can share resources, study together, and offer mutual encouragement, can also help reduce the isolation and stress often associated with exam preparation. Beadlescomb (2019) acknowledges the perspective of social work students who have experienced leaders in the social work field as mentors. Black students traditionally report feeling supported having instructors and mentors that are from similar racial backgrounds and being motivated to continue towards completion of their social work degrees and licensure (Beadlescomb, 2019). Developing mentorship programs that pair seasoned professionals with entry-level social workers pursuing licensure can facilitate a smoother navigation of the licensing and credentialing process for unlicensed social workers.

### **Addressing Bias and Structural Inequities**

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) has standards for every accredited social work education program in order to ensure consistency across the profession with what each social worker should learn. Surveying past test takers to explore their experiences and understand their needs can be helpful in ensuring the strategies and solutions to address some of the systemic barriers are impactful. Research shows that structural inequities, including racial bias and socioeconomic barriers, disproportionately affect candidates from marginalized groups. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive review of both the exam itself and the broader credentialing process. Since 2022, three states have eliminated examinations as a prerequisite for social work license,

and research has not indicated an increase in ethical violations among social workers who attained licensure without passing the ASWB exam (Apgar & Nienow, 2023). This means, there is room to explore shifting from capitalistic ideals that reinforce structures of oppression and navigating towards true competency-based assessments that acknowledges application of social work skills in real time.

### **Bias Audits of Licensing Exams**

Licensing bodies should regularly conduct bias audits of their exams to identify and eliminate any questions or formats that disproportionately disadvantage candidates from certain backgrounds. These audits could involve analyzing pass rates by race, gender, and socioeconomic status, as well as reviewing the exam content for potential bias (M. P. DeCarlo, 2021). Additionally, when adding new exam content writers, there should be a process developed to ensure the individuals self-assess their individual biases and are committed to creating examination questions that do not continue to reinforce structural bias. By using data-driven approaches to detect inequities, licensing organizations can develop more inclusive and fair exams.

### **Competency-Based Assessments**

The ASWB has professed the disconnect between the licensing exam and the CSWE social work competencies, admittedly stating the lack of a correlation between social work competencies and examination questions. In addition to modifying the current exam structure, there has been growing advocacy for moving toward competency-based assessments that prioritize practical, real-world skills over memorization of theoretical knowledge (Apgar & Luquet, 2022). Competency-based evaluations would focus on how well candidates can apply their social work training in diverse settings, ensuring that future social workers are equipped to meet the complex needs of their clients. Like validity testing of evidenced based practices using recording and consultation, the profession can require validity testing of concepts, theories and interventions learned in academic social work programs.

## **Building a More Inclusive Profession**

The goal of enhancing diversity, equity, and inclusion in the licensing and credentialing process is to create a more inclusive and representative social work profession. By addressing barriers to licensure, we can ensure that social workers from all backgrounds are given an equal opportunity to enter the field and contribute to the profession. Efforts to reform the licensing process should be part of a broader commitment to promoting equity within the profession, including recruitment, mentorship, and ongoing professional development opportunities for social workers from underrepresented groups. As highlighted by Joseph (2024), a profession that upholds integrity, fairness, and equity at every step of the credentialing process is essential for advancing social justice. As a profession, it is the ethical duty to ensure inequities are challenged, including within the

licensing and credentialing process. Curriculum, practicum experiences, and ongoing professional development opportunities are all opportunities for this to take place.

### **Insight From Other Disciplines**

Muirhead et al. (2022) explored diversity in nursing and challenges in their licensure exam. It was identified that not only in nursing but also in the medical licensing exam and in the pharmacist exam, White students score consistently higher than non-White students. A recommendation provided was to compare curriculum and licensure preparation at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) to help target and explore the inequities. There is also the identification of generational patterns of systemic barriers, upward mobility and inequity when analyzing scores of standardized testings. Specific factors impacting disparate test scores that are more connected to the mental health of examination takers include testing anxiety, test taking ability, not having the time to prepare due to other life commitments, and a tendency for students to perform based on the expectations of themselves. Research from the *Journal of Teaching and Learning* indicates that 15-22% of students experience test anxiety, with a greater risk on first generation students, which can significantly impact performance on standardized tests (Spadafora et al., 2020). The nursing profession has implemented several reforms to address disparities in licensure exams. For example, the National Council of State Boards of Nursing has introduced alternative pathways to licensure for candidates who may struggle with traditional testing methods. This has resulted in improved pass rates among diverse candidates (Muirhead et al., 2022).

A study analyzed the pharmacy licensing exam and found that providing exam preparation resources tailored to underrepresented groups improved pass rates by 15% among these candidates (Rashrash et al., 2024). This included mentorship programs and culturally relevant study materials. In California, reforms in the counseling licensure process included the introduction of competency-based assessments that focus on real-world scenarios rather than solely theoretical knowledge. These changes were shown to reduce disparities in pass rates among minority candidates, leading to a more diverse licensed workforce (Caldwell, 2023).

### **Leveraging AI and Technology**

Technology and artificial intelligence (AI) could address security for the licensure exam. Mueller (2023) proposes that since manually writing questions is an extensive process, AI tools may assist in writing test items. The AI algorithms could be employed to analyze exam content for potential biases. By reviewing test questions and pass rates across different demographic groups, AI could also be employed to identify patterns that suggest unfair advantages or disadvantages. This type of analysis could allow licensing boards to efficiently refine exam questions, ensuring that they are culturally sensitive and relevant to diverse populations. Regular bias audits facilitated by AI might also help maintain fairness in the testing process over time.

Technology can provide tailored study resources that cater to the unique needs of diverse candidates. AI-driven platforms can assess an individual's strengths and weaknesses, creating personalized learning plans that address knowledge gaps and provide targeted practice questions. This level of customization can help candidates from various backgrounds prepare more effectively for licensing exams, ultimately improving pass rates and reducing disparities. Online platforms can facilitate mentorship opportunities between experienced licensed social workers and candidates from underrepresented groups. Through virtual meetings, mentorship programs can offer guidance, emotional support, and practical advice on navigating the licensing process. This connection can help alleviate feelings of isolation and provide candidates with valuable insights from those who have successfully navigated similar challenges. Additionally, the creation of online forums and support networks where candidates can connect, share resources, and discuss their experiences can develop communities that can provide a sense of belonging and solidarity, helping to empower individuals from diverse backgrounds as they prepare for licensure. Such platforms can also serve as a space for sharing best practices and strategies for overcoming common challenges (Reamer, 2023).

Technology can also improve accessibility for candidates with disabilities or those who are non-native English speakers. AI can enable the development of adaptive testing environments that accommodate individual needs, such as real-time translation to offer exams in multiple languages, or utilizing speech recognition for candidates with writing difficulties. These enhancements ensure that all candidates have equitable access to the licensing process. Furthermore, advanced data analytics can help licensing boards track trends and outcomes related to DEI initiatives. By collecting and analyzing demographic data on exam candidates, boards can identify disparities in pass rates and tailor interventions accordingly. Data-driven approaches enable ongoing evaluation of the effectiveness of DEI strategies, fostering accountability and continuous improvement. It is hopeful that in the future AI can be proven to be helpful in these ways.

## **Conclusion**

Enhancing diversity, equity, and inclusion in the social work licensing and credentialing process is not merely an ethical obligation, it is essential for the integrity and future of the profession. As the social work field grapples with systemic disparities that disproportionately affect underrepresented groups, it is critical to implement meaningful reforms. By addressing the biases inherent in the licensing exams, diversifying exam content, and providing accessible resources for all candidates, we can cultivate a more equitable pathway to licensure. Such efforts will not only empower aspiring social workers from diverse backgrounds but also enrich the profession, ultimately leading to more culturally competent practitioners who can better serve the communities in need.

## **Call to Action**

We call upon policymakers, licensing boards, and educational institutions to collaborate in re-evaluating and reforming the licensing process. It is time to prioritize equity and justice in social work, ensuring that every candidate has a fair opportunity to

succeed. Together, let us dismantle the barriers to entry, champion inclusive practices, and commit to a future where the social work profession reflects the diversity of the populations it serves. Our action today can pave the way for a more inclusive and just tomorrow in social work.

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