



Substance Abuse Professional (SAP)

QUALIFICATION EXAMINATION

DESIGN & VALIDATION

[49 CFR] Section 40.281 Who Is Qualified To Act as a SAP?

"It is now the Department's policy that a nationally-recognized SAP training organization that constructs an examination should have the examination validated by an outside test evaluation organization (as MRO groups have done for their tests) or by an effective peer review. The validation process would include a discussion of test items, areas of knowledge tested, and the effectiveness with which the test items measure the areas of knowledge involved. It should also include a psychometric review that evaluates how the items and questions are structured. The review should suggest modifications to the examinations, if needed, to improve its quality."

66 FR 41943 [8/9/01], page 41949, as downloaded from DOT Office of Drug and Alcohol Policy and Compliance at <http://www.dot.gov/ost/dapc> 1/28/03 by J. Wolfgang, C-SAPA, (503) 297-4113.

The US Department of Transportation's (DOT's) policy for examination development for the SAP examination is cited above. The Substance Abuse Program Administrators' Certification Commission (SAPACC) has complied with and exceeded all requirements of this policy.

Plut Examination Services was retained to assist in the development of the "Q-SAP" examination. Richard Plut, Ph.D., has eight years of experience developing nationally recognized license and certification examinations, including the National Podiatry License examination (PMLexes) and the certification examination for substance abuse program administrators (C-SAPA).

A committee of Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) was retained for the development of the Q-SAP examination. These are all individuals who are experienced as SAPs and recognized as competent and articulate, necessary characteristics for examination development.

All license and certification examinations are designed to discriminate between individuals who possess at least minimum competence and those who do not. Minimal competence is a construct that has great utility in examination development. As individuals obtain knowledge and skills within any profession, they move towards competence. At some point in their training they can be considered competent. The theoretical point at which individuals are first considered competent is known as minimal competence. Individuals who are not at least minimally competent should not be allowed to practice independently.

The examination development of the SAP exam began with the committee of SMEs defining the characteristics of the minimally competent SAP. This provided a framework for the development of the test specification and for writing the items.

The next step in the examination was to define the areas of practice of SAPs. This began before the meeting when the SMEs were asked to think about the areas of practice of SAPs. In the meeting, the areas of practice were defined and consensus was obtained among the SMEs that these areas defined the job descriptions of SAPs. The committee then assigned the number of items to each job area based on

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the frequency of use and importance of each area. The committee reached consensus on the numbers of items for each area, thereby setting the test specification. The test specification defines the number of items within each area of the test.

As a follow-up to definition of minimal competence, there were a number of draft examination items reviewed. The committee reviewed each item as a group, modifying them as necessary to achieve consensus on each item. All SMEs in the committee had to agree that the correct alternative in the item was correct, all the incorrect alternatives were incorrect, the item belonged in the category to which it was assigned, that it was at the correct level of difficulty, and that it contributed to the discrimination of candidates who are minimally competent from those who are not in order for it to be accepted and used on the examination. All items were written in a straightforward fashion, testing the knowledge of the candidates. No attempt was made to deceive the candidates with “trick” questions. All items were referenced with the federal regulation or guidance that applied to the item. By consensus, the committee agreed to use the passing point of 70% correct.

Further examination development will take place as these examinations are given. All tests are reviewed by an SME prior to their administration to assure there are no items that are inappropriate or duplicate items, and that there are no items that are outdated due to rule or regulation changes. After the test is given, all items with questionable item statistics are sent for review again by an SME.

The test is conducted in a controlled environment and is proctored. Four hours are permitted for its completion. With the test booklet, candidates are given a comment sheet in which they may make remarks about the test in general or about specific items. When it is possible to identify an item that is on the candidate’s comment sheet, the item is sent to be reviewed by the SME along with the candidate’s comment. The test statistics of all examination administrations are examined after each test to assure that the test is reliable.

By using the above techniques, SAPACC has met and exceeded the requirements of the DOT Office of Drug and Alcohol Policy and Compliance for examination development. This will assure that the SAP examination is, and continues to be, a valid and reliable instrument for determining if candidates possess at least minimal competence.