



Advancing the Assessment of Competence®

July 15, 2020

The National Board of Examiners in Optometry (NBE) has heard from several stakeholders within the profession regarding its handling of exam administrations during this unprecedented global pandemic. We have also received communications claiming that NBE should be more proactive in response to the current situation. To ensure transparency and bolster public trust, NBE takes this opportunity to respond to such concerns and describe the organizational measures that we have taken.

NBE is, first and foremost, a testing organization. The ultimate aim and the heart of our mission is reliable examinations that assess candidates for initial licensure. Throughout the exam process, candidates crave fairness; state regulators require integrity; the general public demands competence. Because the stakes of our exams are high, our commitment to reliability must be likewise lofty.

COVID-19 has presented unique challenges to this goal. NBE, like so many other organizations, has had to adapt its practices without forsaking its mission. Our individual and collective patience has been tested, and this frustration is felt universally in all aspects of the optometric profession—including here at NBE. NBE cares deeply about the safety of all who participate in our exams, and for this reason, NBE has taken extraordinary measures during this time.

In mid-March, NBE made the difficult decision to suspend testing at the National Center of Clinical Testing in Optometry (NCCTO®) in Charlotte, North Carolina. Pearson VUE announced similar closures of its testing centers nationwide shortly thereafter. These closures necessitated the rescheduling of all three parts of the NBE examination series.

The Part III Clinical Skills Examination (CSE®) was primarily affected by the NCCTO closure. Since re-opening in May, the NCCTO has provided a controlled environment within which to conduct Part III. NBE has taken numerous steps to limit the risk of viral transmission and provide a reasonable level of safety to exam participants. By way of example:

- Everyone in the NCCTO is required to wear a face mask.
- Entry into the NCCTO is contingent upon passing a wellness screening, which includes temperature checks and completion of a COVID-19 symptoms questionnaire.
- Social distancing is practiced throughout the NCCTO.
- Staff and standardized patients completed training dedicated to our safety protocols.
- Strict disinfection procedures are followed after every candidate and every testing session.
- Deep cleaning is performed nightly at the NCCTO.
- Candidates are required to wash their hands throughout the examinations.
- Hand sanitizer, gloves, goggles, and face shields are available to candidates.
- Slit lamps and phoropters have been outfitted with protective barriers.
- NCCTO staff are communicating our safety procedures to candidates in advance of their examinations, including current CDC travel recommendations.

The rationale behind NBEO thus far declining requests to administer the Part III exam at multiple locations rests on two central issues – public health and safety and examination integrity.

First, prior to 2011, the Part III examination was administered at the schools and colleges of optometry. This process required approximately 550 examiners, 400 patients, site coordinators, and multiple staff members to be onsite for administration of the examination.

Accordingly, returning to the schools and colleges of optometry would require coordination of many individuals traveling to multiple sites at specific times. It would require many individuals to travel to multiple different locations in order to deliver the examination. This would potentially increase the public health risk by increasing the number of individuals required to administer the examination and the number of individuals to whom candidates may be exposed, thus creating a possible scenario of examiners themselves causing viral spread. At this time and absent further study, NBEO does not feel sufficiently confident that it can reduce this risk to an acceptable level.

Additionally, administering the Part III examination outside of the NCCTO would impinge upon candidates' current ability to select an examination time over the course of an entire year. Further, offering the Part III examination at the schools and colleges of optometry would not eliminate candidate travel because many candidates who take this exam do so while located on external rotations away from the schools. For these reasons, NBEO's current best judgment is that any perceived benefit of eliminating single-site testing at the NCCTO is outweighed by the arguable risks associated with the multiple-site model of testing.

Second, examination integrity has been a central driver for NBEO's decisions thus far. NBEO is concerned that its core purpose of exam integrity might be compromised by administering the examination in such varied settings. A principal reason for the decision to consolidate the Part III exam into a single location was to reduce variability and ensure uniformity in the exam administration. Creation of the NCCTO was a significant advancement towards improving the reliability and validity of the examination. For these reasons, NBEO currently believes that maintaining Part III testing at a single, established location (i.e., the NCCTO) with repeatable, reliable safety and testing controls is the only reasonably viable option.

With regard to Parts I & II, since learning of the Pearson VUE decision to temporarily close testing centers nationally, NBEO has maintained daily communication with Pearson VUE leadership. We have worked tirelessly to identify opportunities for our candidates to access the examinations at Pearson Professional Centers (PPCs). For example:

- NBEO has allowed candidates to choose their Part I ABS administration over a three-week window in July/August or a three-week window in November; this accommodation is a significant increase from the typical four-day window in March.
- NBEO increased the Part II PAM/TMOD administration to an entire week in July, instead of a single day in April. These testing windows were increased to the fullest extent practically possible. NBEO's decision to substantially increase examination windows is a direct response to capacity concerns resulting from PPCs operating at 50% capacity due to social distancing protocols.
- As a result of NBEO's continual communications with Pearson VUE, Pearson VUE converted many other, lower-stakes tests from PPCs to a remote proctoring platform, thus opening up seats for our candidates.
- Pearson VUE increased PPC business hours of operation where possible and has opened as many locations as possible on weekends for our candidates.
- NBEO approved the use of temporary testing locations that Pearson VUE has converted to PPCs for our candidates, thus providing additional choices to NBEO candidates.

About the NBEO

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- NBEO has advocated for “essential business” status to state governments, navigating complexities that could have prohibited our candidates from being eligible to sit for NBEO examinations at PPCs within those states.

All of the above steps occurred prior to the opening of seat selection for Parts I & II. Since then, NBEO created a candidate escalation process to address specific scheduling challenges voiced by several candidates. As part of that process, NBEO has directly advocated for these candidates with Pearson VUE, maintaining phone and email communication with various candidates. At NBEO’s request, Pearson VUE now communicates location specific changes to NBEO so that we can inform candidates. In sum, NBEO’s leadership and advocacy with Pearson VUE have worked to increase accessibility to the examinations without compromising the integrity of the examination process.

Like everyone else, NBEO finds itself in uncharted waters. We will not risk complacency, as the current situation remains fluid. Accordingly, NBEO is committed to a continued, self-assessment of our response, and we have created a task force to assist with that ongoing analysis. We appreciate the continued support of the optometric community as we proceed with focus, purpose and resolve to maintain a safe and secure testing environment for our candidates, while fulfilling NBEO’s mission to provide regulatory boards with valid, reliable measures of optometric competence.

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