

The ACVP Certifying Examination: Updates, Demystification, and Ways Forward February 20, 2025, Informational Webinar Frequently Asked Questions

With changes to the Certifying Examinations over the last 5-10 years, is there a concern that the value of ACVP certification has depreciated?

The ACVP Certifying Examination is a means to assess candidate proficiency as day-one ready anatomic or clinical pathologists. However, these examinations only represent the *final* summative assessment of trainees in their training as pathologists. The training program and sponsors ensure that candidates are appropriately prepared for the examination. Even in the current 8-hour format of the Phase II examination, the examination cannot assess *all* skills and knowledge necessary of a day-one ready pathologist. Therefore, there is a need for comprehensive and formative assessment throughout their training program.

It is the philosophy of the Certification and Examination Council (CEC) of the ACVP that candidates appropriately trained and prepared are likely to pass the Certifying Examination. As such, we believe that the recent pass rates (compared to those in earlier decades) reflect both a fair and representative examination as well as exceptional preparedness of candidates, rather than examination deficiencies. In addition, the passing (cut) score is not arbitrary but determined through psychometrically rigorous methods. This ensures that a passing score is representative of the necessary knowledge and skills expected of a day-one ready pathologist, as determined by a group of representative Diplomates. The emphasis by the CEC on examination validity and reliability is an evidence-based approach to ensuring that our examinations are representative, rigorous and defensible.

It cannot be stated more strongly that ACVP Diplomates recently certified are considered by both the CEC and the ACVP Board of Directors to be highly qualified pathologists equivalent to those certified in earlier years. They are fully valued members of the ACVP!

Are there any plans to revert to an in-person Phase II Certifying Examination?

No, there are no plans to revert to an in-person Phase II Certifying Examination. Providing broad accessibility to candidates in North America and internationally is a priority.

What is the reasoning for the exclusive use of multiple choice questions for the examinations, and is there any consideration of other formats?

Multiple choice questions (MCQs) are a psychometrically highly valid question style for high stakes summative examinations such as the ACVP Certifying Examination. They have the benefit of rapid

electronic marking and provision of statistical data on all options (correct and wrong options) of each question. This allows the ACVP psychometrician to quickly identify potentially problematic questions post-examination and to thus trigger a review of these to determine if they should remain in the examination or be removed. This high degree of question data also allows for determining which questions are discerning, and therefore, ideal questions. MCQs are not susceptible to the marking subjectivity and bias that other question styles may be. In addition, MCQs can range from testing recall of knowledge to requiring complex integrative thinking.

The Certification and Examination Council (CEC) continues to review other possible question styles such as very short answer questions (VSAQs). This question style requires short answers (up to five words) to be written by candidates. This has the appeal of requiring candidates to produce the answer *de novo* as opposed to being presented with options as in MCQs, which eliminates the variable of cuing bias. However, there are logistical and other aspects of VSAQ usage that need to be carefully considered before any decision is made to include these in future certifying examinations.

It is very important to note that no changes in format will occur for the 2025 Certifying Examinations; only MCQs will be used.

Any future changes in examination format will be announced well in advance of the implementation to allow training programs and candidates to prepare.

How are the examination cut scores determined?

Cut scores (marks needed to pass examinations) are determined by the process of standard setting, which utilizes a group of subject matter experts (Diplomates) selected to be representative of ACVP demographics. Working with an expert psychometrician, this group determines the question performance expected of minimally competent, day-one ready pathologists. A standard setting is necessary after any significant change in examination format or content. The last standard setting for the Phase II examination was conducted in 2023. The cut score determined from a standard setting remains the same for subsequent examinations until a new standard setting occurs, with psychometric equating ensuring a similar degree of year-to-year difficulty on examinations.

Descriptions are an important aspect of pathologist skill set but are not currently assessed for by the Phase II examinations. Is there a concern about losing this skill?

The Certification and Examination Council (CEC) wholeheartedly agrees that ensuring strong descriptive skills is a fundamental aspect of pathology training. However, the ACVP Certifying Examination is the final summative assessment of pathology proficiency. It is not, nor should it be, the assessment of this proficiency. The essential skills and knowledge required to be an entry-level pathologist are obtained through three years, at minimum, of competency-based veterinary pathology training. Not every skill or piece of knowledge essential to the role of a pathologist can be assessed by the Phase II examinations. Therefore, skills such as microscopic descriptions and necropsy techniques must be assessed during the training program. Importantly, competency needs to be documented prior to candidates being approved to take the Phase II examination by the training program or individual sponsor.

The Phase II Certifying Examination pass rate is higher for clinical pathologists than for anatomic pathologists, especially in recent years. Why do you think this is so?

The pass rate difference is neither surprising nor problematic. The psychometrician who works with the Certification and Examination Council (CEC) has informed us that large variations in yearly pass rates are expected given the small number of candidates writing these examinations. This is particularly so for the clinical pathology candidate group which often has less than 50 candidates writing per year. The candidate pool also impacts year-to-year variation in pass rate. The passing rate changes over time are not from variability in the examination, as psychometric equating mechanisms ensure similar examination difficulty over time.

Finally, the Phase II anatomic and clinical pathology examinations are entirely separate examinations with different cut scores (passing mark needed) which were determined by separate standard setting procedures. There is no expectation that passing rates should be equivalent between these two examinations.

Now that glass slide evaluations are not being used, what is being done to assess whole slide image (WSI) implementation as part of the ACVP Certifying Examinations?

The Certification and Examination Council (CEC) leadership recognizes that whole slide image (WSI) use is a desired next step for the Phase II examinations. This utilization would be far more complex than using images in a diagnostic setting. It requires consideration of examination content security and integration of examination software with WSI viewing. The first ACVP Digitization Task Force released their report in 2021. Their findings highlighted technological and trainee accessibility barriers to immediate implementation of WSIs in the certifying examinations at that time. Technology has changed and it is time to re-evaluate this. To this end, the ACVP Board of Directors and the CEC have established the ACVP Digitization Task Force for Whole Slide Images as Part of the Certifying Examination. This task force will comprehensively evaluate the logistical components and resources necessary for implementing WSI use into our Phase II anatomic and clinical pathology examinations.

At the end of Phase I and Phase II examinations, there is a section where the test taker can give their own immediate feedback about the test. How is this feedback evaluated by these various CEC committees?

The post-examination survey results are collated and reviewed by the Certification and Examination Council (CEC) after each testing cycle. This feedback is highly valuable, and concerns are always taken seriously. Each is considered regarding whether action needs to be taken. For example, several past comments referred to concerns over the quality of occasional images. Decisions were made to modify or replace these images or else completely remove these questions from the database so they cannot be used again. This feedback also led to improved quality assurance protocols for the images used.

Would ACVP consider having a (more) strict assessment of testing centers?

The ACVP contract with our examination administration company, Meazure Learning, ensures that all testing centers utilized for ACVP examinations meet standards for computer, internet, and monitor capabilities necessary to adequately complete the examinations. Accessibility (avoiding excessive travel for candidates) is also an important consideration. Concerns expressed about specific testing centers are addressed by Meazure Learning. Feedback on testing center experience is highly valued, and we strongly encourage candidates to continue communicating any concerns.