ACVP Certifying Examination 2022 Update and FAQs

With the changes made to the American College of Veterinary Pathologists (ACVP) Certifying Examination in the last few years, the Certifying Examination Board (CEB) provides here a detailed update on the current format of the exam, the reasoning and context for some of the changes that the examination has undergone, and finally, discussion of future directions and challenges. We seek to do this by informing and engaging stakeholders via the comprehensive FAQ below, through solicitation of feedback and questions, and through hosting an informational webinar.

The CEB sees transparency and communication as core values to ensure the success of the examination in service to our profession, and we recognize that informing ACVP stakeholders of the current format and direction of the examination is a central step in fulfilling this mission.

The Certifying Examination (CE) serves a vital role in the American College of Veterinary Pathologists. Through successful completion of the CE, Diplomate members of the ACVP are recognized for their expertise within the field of veterinary pathology. The CE has undergone significant changes from its first administration in conjunction with the Annual Meeting. For many years, the CE was given at the Iowa State University’s Scheman Center in Ames, Iowa. It consisted of four sections given over three days. Anatomic and Clinical Pathology examinations included short-answer and essay-style questions in addition to multiple choice questions (MCQ). During this period, the Examination Committee was responsible for composing a new examination each year and there was tremendous variation of the pass rate between years.

In 2012, the Certifying Examination Board was conceptualized, with the ultimate purpose of establishing an autonomous body to provide oversight and governance for all aspects of the ACVP certifying examination process, from credentialing to maintenance of certification, as well providing continuous evaluation for examination improvement. Acting on recommendations regarding best practices for high stakes examinations, the CEB has instituted progressive changes to the examination format over the last 10 years. These include use of a phased, two-part certification examination process, development of a “cut score” that recognizes an entry-level standard of competency, and use of equating to ensure that candidates are evaluated by the same pass-fail standards each year.

The first of these changes was implemented in 2014, when the General Pathology section was removed from the four-part examination in Ames and became Phase I of the phased examination process, delivered via a third-party vendor at testing centers worldwide. In 2017, Phase II was modified from a three-part examination to a single pass-fail, one-day examination given at the American Board of Pathology (ABP) testing center in Tampa, Florida. This move allowed delivery of the examination in a facility designed for test administration, including the option for use of microscopes provided by ABP, computer monitors for delivery of test content, allowing integration of images within the examination format, and increased examination security. In 2021, the Phase II
examination was modified to an all multiple choice question format, facilitating delivery of the examination through a third-party vendor to candidates worldwide.

What is the current structure of the Phase II certifying examination?

The Phase II certifying examination is delivered in a 300 multiple choice question format through a third-party vendor. For the 2022 cycle, the vendor is Prometric, which provides testing centers and live online proctoring (LOP) worldwide. The CEB continues to evaluate the format and testing platforms to determine the most effective and efficient options.

Why does the examination utilize multiple choice questions?

Multiple choice questions are considered a best practice format for high stakes examinations due to their objectivity and reliability in grading. Well-designed MCQs are considered equal or superior to open-ended questions (e.g., slide descriptions and biochemistry write-ups) in testing higher-order cognitive functioning and in eliminating subjectivity, which occurs even with the application of well-constructed, highly vetted rubrics.1-5

The transition to MCQ format was initiated in 2021 to ensure the accessibility of the examination to candidates worldwide. Prior to COVID-19, the CEB had favorably evaluated the MCQ format for implementation, which was subsequently accelerated by the pandemic. The examination now includes MCQs specifically designed to test skills previously evaluated in essays and descriptive questions such as “seek and find,” cell and tissue recognition, and identification of key diagnostic features.

Will the Phase II examination return to the American Board of Pathology's (ABP) test center in Tampa, FL?

No. ABP closed its central testing facility in Tampa. Like other organizations, ABP's pivot to deliver a high stakes examination in response to the pandemic, marked a permanent change in their method of examination delivery – which is now done remotely.

Have digitized slides been considered for use in the Phase II examination?

In 2020-2021, the CEB investigated options for this modality with extensive work completed by a task force composed of both anatomic and clinical pathologists. Many important factors led to the decision not to incorporate digital scans into the examination at this time. Candidates' access to digital capabilities varies widely between programs, particularly for clinical pathology trainees. The capabilities of the current scanners to support high resolution cytology imaging are not comparable in quality to resources available for anatomic pathology. In addition, third-party examination vendors do not support the inclusion of whole slide scans within their test delivery platforms. Organizations like ABP, which use whole slide images (WSI) as the basis of MCQs, rely on an integration between the third-party test platforms and their own secure servers to host the WSI. ACVP does not currently have this type of secure infrastructure, which requires the dedication of financial resources, technical knowledge, and commitment of upkeep. The CEB will continue to evaluate digital slide incorporation into the examination in future years as it becomes an increasingly integral part of our professional practice.

What factors are evaluated to identify and assess potential examination enhancements?
The certifying examination itself must remain fair, consistent, and rigorous. The examination must recognize and select successful candidates that possess an appropriate knowledge base and display an overall preparedness for career entry. The examination must cover the range of skills and knowledge expected of an entry-level pathologist that can be reasonably tested in a written format. A Job Task Analysis (JTA) is performed at regular intervals (no less frequently than every 10 years) and is used to ensure that the skills and knowledge tested on the examination reflect the current practice of veterinary pathology. The next JTA is scheduled for completion in 2026. This process also identifies skills that are expected of veterinary pathologists that do not lend themselves to a test of this type, such as performing a necropsy or generating a blood smear.

Regarding the examination delivery method, the process must be equitable. Candidates worldwide should be able to take the examination, despite travel restrictions and other disruptions to access. The test format must be consistent regardless of format (e.g., whether delivered in a testing center or by LOP). The testing platform must support highly visual veterinary pathology examination content. The examination must be secure in terms of both content development and the delivery environment. Finally, the exam must be financially feasible for test takers.

**What steps is the CEB implementing to ensure examination quality and consistency?**

The CEB oversees all aspects of the certifying examination including that the format is reliable, fair, and of the quality expected of professional certifying examinations. This is completed through processes such as blueprint mapping to the Job Task Analysis, standard setting, equating, and item analysis.

- **A Job Task Analysis (JTA)** is performed at regular intervals (no less frequently than every 10 years) and is used to ensure that the skills and knowledge tested on the examination reflect the current practice of veterinary pathology. The next JTA is scheduled for completion in 2026. This process also identifies skills that are expected of veterinary pathologists that do not lend themselves to a test of this type, such as performing a necropsy or generating a blood smear.

- **Blueprint mapping** of the examination ensures breadth and consistency of assessment, year on year, compared to ACVP Diplomate roles.

- **Standard setting** establishes a cut score for the examination through a criteria-referenced process as recommended for professional certifying examinations. Standard settings are conducted at regular intervals and sooner if test plans change, such as for alterations of structure, format, or delivery. The change of format for Section 3 in 2021 required standard setting of the new portion.

- **Equating** examinations between standard settings ensures that a candidate’s performance will be evaluated against the same standard when making a pass-fail decision.

- **Item analysis** evaluates the statistical performance of individual examination questions. Item statistics are screened for adequacy and flagged items are reviewed individually for potential actionable flaws.

**How will the Training Program Task Force recommendations affect the Certifying Examination?**
With the adoption of the training program accreditation task force recommendations, training programs will be accountable for ensuring that examination candidates are well prepared for the workplace, by ensuring that they demonstrate proficiency in "non-testable" skills, such as necropsy, blood smear preparation, and description writing.

References


