



# NATIONAL BOARD OF EXAMINERS IN OPTOMETRY

## Report of the Task Force to Review Alternative Testing Methodologies During COVID-19



September 14, 2020

## **Introduction**

In March 2020, the United States began mass closures through businesses, schools, and organizations of all types in response to a global pandemic, COVID-19. NBEO candidates faced sudden closures within Pearson Professional Centers utilized for computer-based testing and a temporary suspension of testing at the National Center of Clinical Testing in Optometry (NCCTO). Candidates scheduled for the March Part I ABS and April Part II PAM/TMOD examinations were impacted by Pearson VUE's decision to close their testing centers throughout the country. The NCCTO in Charlotte, NC suspended testing from March 17 through May 17, 2020. Slightly over 250 candidates needed to be rescheduled for Part III CSE testing due to the two-month testing suspension. Upon reopening on May 18, 2020, NBEO provided over 300 potential exam appointments for Part III CSE through the end of June. This allowed all candidates from the graduating class of 2020 the opportunity to take the examination.

During the temporary testing suspension NBEO began research efforts to review various alternative testing methods while simultaneously creating alternative testing plans for the Part I ABS and Part II PAM/TMOD examinations with Pearson VUE. The NCCTO reopened mid-May with a multitude of safety measures in place for candidate testing. After listening to concerns from stakeholder groups, NBEO coordinated with the Association of Regulatory Boards in Optometry (ARBO) to convene a Task Force. The charge of this Task Force was to explore alternative testing methods for candidates seeking the NBEO exam series (Parts I, II, and III) used for licensure by jurisdictional regulatory boards.

## **Members of the Task Force**

Bill Rafferty, OD (chair) – State Board Executive Director/ ARBO/NBEO

Larry Davis, OD – UMSL Dean/ASCO/NBEO

Donovan Crouch, OD – ARBO/NBEO

Jerry Richt, OD – NBEO Board Member/ ARBO

Patricia Bennett, MSW – ARBO Board Member/State Board Executive Director

Ron Hopping, OD, MPH –State Board Member/ARBO (NBERC)

Annabelle Storch, OD – recent AOSA President

Larissa Smith, PhD - NBOME Psychometrician

John Sicotte, MBA - NBEO Board Member

Lisa Fennell – ARBO Executive Director

Jill Bryant, OD, MPH – NBEO Executive Director

Patrick O'Neill, OD – ex-officio, ARBO President

Lewis Reich, OD, PhD – ex-officio, NBEO President/SCO President/ASCO

## **Advisory to Task Force**

Dennis Maynes, CESP – Caveon Chief Scientist, Data forensics

Brooke Houck, PhD -- NBEO Psychometrician

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## Executive Summary

After listening to concerns from stakeholder groups amidst the mass closures of business, school, and organizations due to the global pandemic that began in earnest in the United States in March 2020, NBEO coordinated with the Association of Regulatory Boards in Optometry (ARBO) to convene a Task Force. Coordination with ARBO was critical considering that their member regulatory boards are dependent upon the NBEO examinations for licensure. The Task Force purpose was to discuss potential alternative testing methods for NBEO licensure exams. The Task Force met for three sessions of approximately 2 hours each using videoconferencing.

The group reviewed issues raised by stakeholders including, but not limited to the following: regulatory boards' needs to keep exams valid and reliable for the issuance of licenses, concerns for the safety of candidates traveling to fulfill examination requirements, safety of the testing environment for candidates taking exams and NBEO staff administering exams. The task force discussed possible alternative testing methods for the computer-based examinations (Part I & Part II) given at Pearson Professional Centers throughout the United States, its territories, and Canada as well as the Part III Clinical Skills Exam provided at the National Center of Clinical Testing in Optometry (NCCTO) in Charlotte, NC.

The first meeting of the Task Force focused on the Part III Clinical Skills Exam. The second meeting focused on the computer-based exams. During the final meeting, the Task Force synthesized information presented and discussed and composed recommendations.

The Task Force ultimately recommended the following guidance to the NBEO Board of Directors:

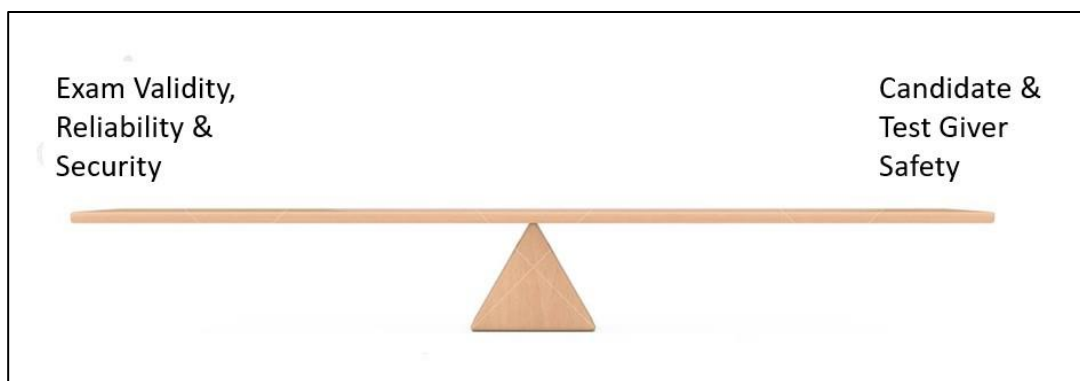
1. Examination integrity, reliability, and validity must be maintained;
2. Any changes to testing should be able to be implemented within a 3-month time frame;
3. NBEO should make accommodations in the Part III CSE testing schedule to accommodate group travel of students from schools and colleges;
4. NBEO further investigate the feasibility of a temporary testing site on the west coast
5. Consider outreach for potential advocacy efforts by other organizations; and
6. NBEO should continue to negotiate scheduling options for the computer-based examinations with Pearson VUE.

## Charge of Task Force

The charge of this Task Force was to explore alternative testing methods for candidates seeking the NBEO exam series (Parts I, II, and III) used for licensure by jurisdictional regulatory boards.

### Task Force Goal

The charge of the Task Force presented a substantial challenge. The goal of the group was established during the first meeting: to attempt balancing the need to preserve the integrity of the exam process and the safety and well-being of all involved (candidates and test givers). The Task Force Chair encouraged objectivity and creativity to create viable alternatives to the current testing methodologies.



### Summary of Recognized Issues

The Task Force convened with several known issues established.

1. NBEO Parts I, II, and III are high stakes examinations that have been thoroughly vetted regarding standardization, validity, and defensibility.
2. These examinations are used by state and provincial boards to determine minimal competency regarding licensing optometrists.
3. Most state and provincial boards require by statute that licensee candidates pass all parts of the NBEO exam sequence.
4. Regulatory boards require that the examinations reflect current testing standards and that the examination be unbiased in its development and execution.
5. The COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic has severely restricted travel around the world. Air travel has been especially hard hit due to safety concerns of spreading/contracting the virus.
6. The pandemic has raised concerns regarding the risks associated with taking NBEO examinations and the question has been raised if there is a safer, yet reliable model in which the examinations can be administered.
7. There are concerns by stakeholders regarding the safety of air travel to Charlotte, NC where the NCCTO is located.

8. NBEO has implemented many safety measures consistent with public health guidance at the NCCTO.

## Task Force Process and Meetings

The Task Force held a series of three meetings to review potential alternative test delivery methods. This included review and discussion of potential alternatives for both the NBEO computer-based examinations delivered at Pearson VUE Professional Centers across the country and the performance examinations delivered at NCCTO in Charlotte, NC. Throughout each meeting the Task Force Chair encouraged creativity and active dialogue.

What follows are the agenda and topics discussed from each meeting of the Task Force.

### Meeting 1

Date: July 23, 2020 7:00-9:00pm EST

- Welcome and Introductory Comments - Bill Rafferty, OD
- Discussion of Task Force Purpose and Objectives
- Parameters to Consider (Exam Validity, Reliability & Security vs Candidate/Staff Safety, Travel Considerations)
- Potential Alternative Models for Exploration
  - Part III - CSE & ISE Exams (focus for July 23 meeting)
  - Part I ABS and Part II PAM/TMOD
- Models for consideration
  - Models included in attached document
  - Open discussion for additional models
- Formulate Recommendations to NBEO Board of Directors/Generate Task Force Report once Task Force work completes

### Meeting 2

Date: July 30, 2020 7:00-9:00pm EST

- Welcome – Bill Rafferty, OD
- Executive Session
- Computer-Based Exam Alternative Models for Exploration
  - Models included below
  - Open discussion for additional models
- Follow-up items from July 23 call
  - Provisional license update – Lisa Fennell
  - Charter plane/bus cost breakdown – Jill Bryant, OD

## Meeting 3

Date: August 13, 2020 7:00-9:00pm EST

- Welcome – Bill Rafferty, OD
- Report on State Board Query – Lisa Fennell and/or Pat O’Neill, OD
- Update from meeting with Pearson VUE leadership – Jerry Richt, OD and Jill Bryant, OD
- Review of alternate testing in NCCTO
  - Update
- Review of alternate computer-based testing methods
- Potential Advocacy Efforts—Jerry Richt, OD
- Formulate recommendations

## Summary

The table below summarizes the advantages and disadvantages of each testing methodology considered by the Task Force.

Testing Idea	Advantages	Disadvantages
	<b><u>Clinical Skills Examination</u></b>	
Continue National Center of Clinical Testing in Optometry (NCCTO) testing in accordance with public health and governmental safety guidelines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Safety measures in place</li> <li>• Allows for the same high fidelity, standardized examination experience for all candidates</li> <li>• Examination protocols remain intact</li> <li>• Candidates self-select an examination appointment over a 1-year period</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Requires travel to Charlotte, NC – issue at concern</li> </ul>
Suspend all NCCTO testing for 1 year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eliminates concerns about travel to Charlotte, NC</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presents significant licensure issues for Class of 2021</li> <li>• If state boards accept candidates for licensure without Part III CSE, candidates that do not meet the minimally competent standard will potentially gain licensure (normal Part III CSE pass rate ~85%)</li> <li>• Risk to NBEO in not fulfilling its mission</li> <li>• NBEO faces loss of revenue with staff layoffs and budget cuts</li> </ul>
Modified version of Part III limited to essential skills only given at the schools and colleges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limiting to 2 stations (normally 4 in full exam) -- reduces the number of</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cost of examination delivered remotely would be increased due to NBEO costs</li> </ul>

of optometry while maintaining operations at NCCTO for Part III CSE	<p>examiners and patients necessary to interact with candidates decreasing potential viral exposure</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Addresses travel concerns to Charlotte for most (only unsuccessful candidates or those seeking licensure in a state that requires NCCTO exam would travel to Charlotte)</li> <li>• Provides more choice to candidates</li> </ul>	<p>(standard setting, IT resources/requirements for scoring, examiner and patient expenses, administrative costs, school capitation fees)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decreases exam validity, reliability, and security</li> <li>• Uncertainty if licensing boards will accept</li> <li>• Uncertainty regarding governmental restrictions in each geographic location of the schools/colleges—could make planning initiatives challenging</li> </ul>
NBEO upfits RV/buses/vans with standardized examination lanes, standardized patients, NBEO trained examiners to travel to each School and College of Optometry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eliminates concerns about travel to Charlotte, NC</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cost prohibitive</li> <li>• Timeline not sufficient for need</li> <li>• Likely to increase risk of virus spread as a result of small, closed spaces</li> </ul>
<b><u>Computer-Based Examinations</u></b>		
Paper and Pencil Testing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Possible decreased travel for candidates</li> <li>• Rescheduling less dependent on Pearson VUE</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time prohibitive</li> <li>• Cost prohibitive</li> <li>• Complex logistics if governmental closures have shut down Pearson VUE centers; likely testing locations also shut down</li> <li>• Uncertainty around variables of breaking contract with Pearson VUE</li> </ul>
Remote Proctoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eliminates candidate travel</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decreases exam validity, reliability, and security</li> <li>• Uncertainty if licensing boards will accept</li> <li>• Time prohibitive</li> <li>• Cost prohibitive</li> <li>• Fairness issue (not all candidates have same level of internet access and technology)</li> </ul>
Utilize computer labs at schools for exam administration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diminishes travel for candidates (potentially, but based on location of externship)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decreases exam validity, reliability, and security</li> <li>• Time prohibitive (exam files not easily transferrable from Pearson VUE format to other software format)</li> <li>• Uncertainty around variables of breaking contract with Pearson VUE</li> <li>• Uncertainty regarding governmental restrictions in each geographic location of</li> </ul>



		the schools/colleges— challenge to planning
NBEO purchase laptops and administer exam at venue near schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diminishes travel for candidates</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Three weekends required to deliver exams (1/3 of schools each weekend, purchase of 750 laptops)</li> <li>• Increasing beyond 1/3 of schools at time—cost prohibitive</li> <li>• Complex logistics if governmental closures have shut down Pearson VUE centers; likely testing locations also shut down</li> <li>• Uncertainty around variables of breaking contract with Pearson VUE</li> <li>• Decreases exam validity, reliability, and security</li> </ul>
Pearson VUE Professional Centers (PPCs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Highest level of exam standardization and security</li> <li>• Options to increase seat availability to candidates</li> <li>• Temporary centers functioning as Pearson Professional Centers</li> <li>• Increase exam windows</li> <li>• Short-term strategy to increase examination windows</li> <li>• Long-term strategy to increase examination windows</li> <li>• Alternative exam administrations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pearson VUE could be impacted by governmental closures again</li> <li>• Difficulty finding seats in desired locations for candidates due to backlog at Pearson VUE and PPCs operating at 50% capacity</li> </ul>

## Recommendations

The variables considered in considering a different methodology involved four essential factors: cost, risk, time, and exam validity. In all methods, each factor was considered. Major changes in testing methods would more than double examination costs with a minimum of 3-4 months of development time, and cause a significant decrease in examination validity while only moderately altering the safety risk profile. After much discussion throughout the three meetings of the Task Force and considering the mission of the NBEO, the following recommendations are hereby given to the Board of Directors of the National Board of Examiners in Optometry:

1. Any alternative testing methodologies used should not compromise examination integrity, reliability, or validity.

2. Any alternative testing methodologies used must be able to be implemented within a 3-month period due to the uncertainty around the future regarding COVID-19 status.
3. The NBEO should make scheduling adjustments for schools and colleges of optometry who wish to send candidates traveling together as a group for testing.
4. The Task force recommends that NBEO further explore the development of a rapid response alternate site to administer the CSE examinations. A location in one of the western states would offer the additional benefit of more equitable travel requirements, for all candidates, during a crisis.
5. Consider outreach for potential advocacy efforts by other organizations.
6. The NBEO should continue to negotiate scheduling options with Pearson VUE for the Part I and Part II examinations.
  - a. The Task Force recognizes that NBEO created an increased window for examinations during COVID-19 increasing Part I ABS window from 4 days to 3 weeks administered during July-August 2020 and 3 weeks in November.
  - b. The Task Force recommends that NBEO continue current efforts to develop short-term plans to increase examination windows beyond 3 weeks if necessary.
  - c. The Task Force recommends that NBEO continue current efforts to develop long-term contingency plans that would allow more flexibility in scheduling.
  - d. Task Force recognizes NBEO work to create “essential services” classification within Pearson VUE providing increased protection to NBEO candidates in scheduling.

## Concluding Remarks

The Task Force would like to thank all members for their service, their candor, and their efforts. We would also like to thank and recognize external partners who served on the Task Force to provide additional expertise in the testing field: Dennis Maynes from Caveon Test Security and Dr. Larissa Smith from National Board of Osteopathic Medicine Examiners. We would also like to thank Dr. Jill Bryant, Executive Director of NBEO for her diligent efforts to forge a path for NBEO candidates and stakeholders through this unprecedented challenge. Lastly, we thank the staff of NBEO for their thorough research into feasibility and costs of the various ideas discussed by the Task Force.