

Licensure: Client Protection or Practitioner Gatekeeping?

Policy and Practice Recommendations for Social Work Education Programs

Kayla M. Whaley
Shelly Paule
Annie J. Keeney

Abstract: *The profession of social work is dedicated to the health and well-being of clients, with an emphasis on social justice and advocacy for vulnerable and oppressed populations. As social work professionals, we must uphold the highest ethical and professional standards outlined in the National Association of Social Work (NASW) Code of Ethics. These standards must equally be held for the establishment of licensure for social workers. A 2021 analysis of Licensed Clinical Social Work (LCSW) pass rates noted significant test-taker pass rate disparities, particularly around race and ethnicity. Unfortunately, for Black, Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) LCSW Candidates, their pass rates are significantly less than those of their white peers. This paper discusses the impact on community members when we have a professional shortage in behavioral health in both numbers of professionals and diversity in licensed clinical social workers. We highlight several strategies that social work programs can implement to mitigate some of the economic and societal barriers the future social work workforce faces, which could ultimately positively impact social work licensure pass rate outcomes and reduce disparities among licensing candidates. Further, this paper calls to action the ASWB to support improvements in licensing pass rates through implementing mentorship, financial support, and expanding language options for the exam to help increase equity in pass rates.*

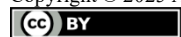
Keywords: *Licensure examination, test-taker disparities, barriers to equity, disproportionality, graduate students*

The Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) licensure exams have been found to have glaring disparities in pass rates, particularly around Black and older test takers (Board of Behavioral Sciences [BBS], 2022). As a result, in 2022, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), the United States' accrediting body for social work education, eliminated the option for social work programs to use licensing pass rates as a reportable program outcome for accreditation or reaffirmation purposes (CSWE, 2022). As a profession that promotes social justice and change, exploring alternative pathways to licensure grounded in anti-oppressive principles and practices is imperative, perhaps now more than ever, given the US's current sociopolitical climate and the increasing scrutiny on diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. This includes acknowledging the economic and societal barriers contributing to licensure gatekeeping that disproportionately affect historically marginalized communities, such as financial stressors, access to resources, and systemic inequities in education (Flagg & Campbell, 2021).

Social work programs can take steps to dismantle licensure gatekeeping and advance a more inclusive and equitable licensure process, one that ensures all candidates, regardless

Kayla M. Whaley, MSW, LCSW, Lecturer, Shelly Paule, MSW, LCSW, MSW, Graduate Advisor and Lecturer, and Annie J. Keeney, PhD, MSW, PPS, Associate Professor, School of Social Work, San Diego State University, San Diego, CA.

Copyright © 2025 Authors, Vol. 25 No. 2 (Summer 2025), 547-565, DOI: 10.18060/28619



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

of background, have the opportunity to become licensed practitioners and serve their communities. As such, this paper discusses (1) bias within the ASWB licensing exam and the need for structural reforms, and (2) the experiences of BIPOC and marginalized students, including how MSW programs can offer better support throughout the licensure process. Though we recognize these are two distinct issues, we address both in tandem to increase academic discourse on how to improve licensure pass rates for all candidates. This paper focuses exclusively on licensed clinical social workers (LCSW) licensure. However, we recognize that other ASWB exams exist for different licensure levels, and many social workers do not pursue clinical licensure but still play vital roles in behavioral health.

Background

Licensure in Clinical Social Work

Social workers often provide services to society's most vulnerable populations, such as those experiencing housing or food insecurities (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2024). As such, holding social work providers accountable to ethical and professional standards is vital for protecting the well-being of the communities they serve. This accountability is especially critical for LCSWs responsible for assessing, diagnosing, and intervening in mental health care. Historically, this has been systematically done through licensure following other helping professions models, such as nursing or occupational therapy (Greiner & Knebel, 2003). Licensure establishes clear standards of practice (e.g., billing practices), sets expectations for continued professional development, and ensures a minimum threshold for knowledge, skills, and abilities to intervene as effective community providers (NASW, 2024). Further, these standards of practice increase the probability that licensed clinical social workers may interact with diverse populations across various geographical locations (NASW, 2024). A key part of social work ethics and expectations around practice focuses on ensuring communities are protected from potential harm (NASW, 2024).

Moreover, licensure allows for licensure reciprocity, which is beneficial to LCSWs and the profession. This allows LCSWs to transfer their credentials across state lines. For example, California permits out-of-state social workers to complete the California Law and Ethics exam to have their license recognized; in New York, LCSWs can apply for licensure by endorsement if they have practiced for at least 10 of the last 15 years (BBS, 2024). In addition, reciprocity increases workforce mobility, ensuring that social workers, regardless of location, have comparable qualifications. Professional flexibility is therefore enabled, making it easier to address workforce shortages. This can be instrumental in alleviating workforce shortages in some geographic regions. Further, licensure reciprocity helps maintain consistent standards of practice across the United States. Consistency is crucial for vulnerable populations such as BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, immigrants, and individuals with disabilities, who historically have been disproportionately harmed by the very systems intended to support them (Barrita et al., 2023; Bryant & Kolivoski, 2021).

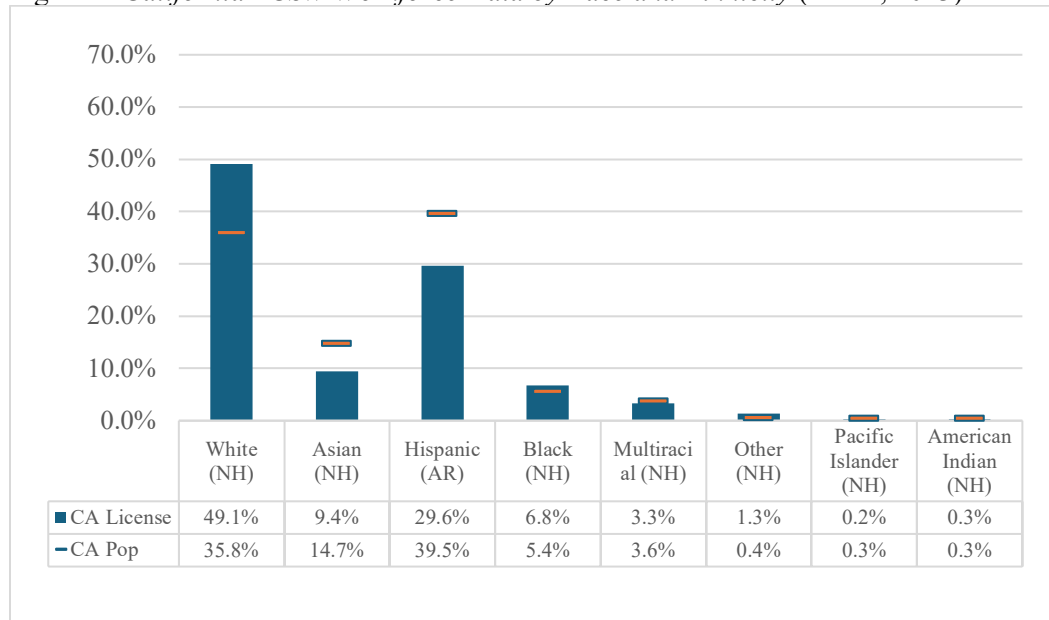
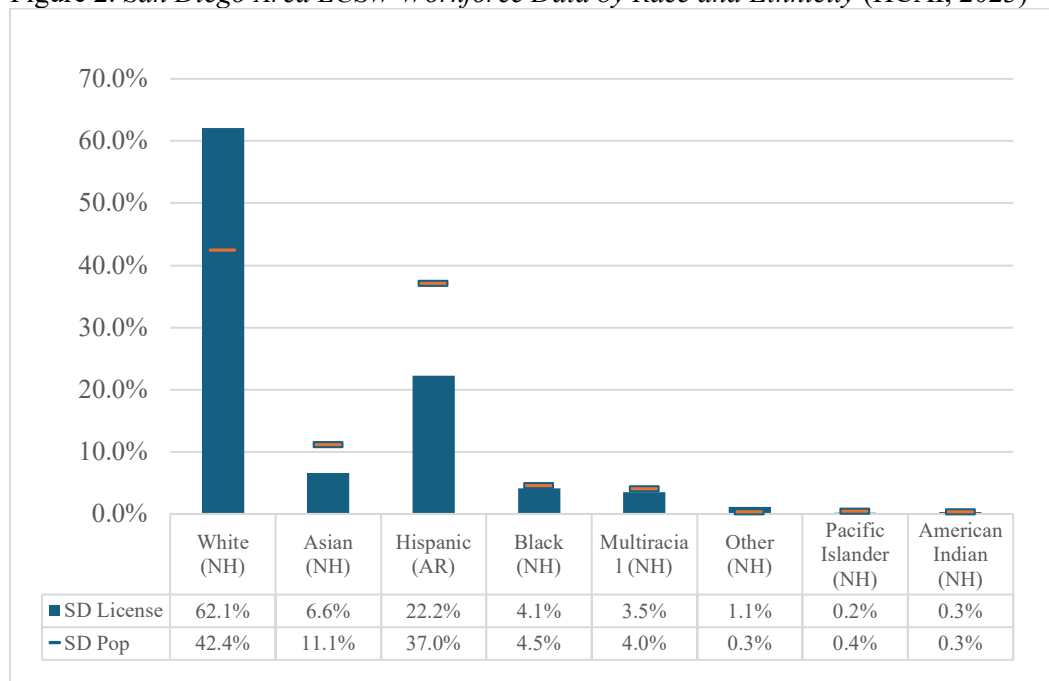
Mental Health Workforce Shortages

The US behavioral health workforce faces critical shortages. Over 122 million people live in Mental Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs), highlighting a national crisis in access to care (National Center for Health Workforce Analysis [NCHWA], 2024). HPSAs are determined based on provider-to-population ratios, geographic accessibility, and demand, with California having the highest disparity in these shortage areas (Health Resources and Services Administration [HRSA], 2025). Nationally, there are only 290,000 licensed clinical social workers (LCSWs), and an additional 6,201 mental health practitioners are needed to meet existing community needs (HRSA, 2025; Zippia, 2025). It is estimated that by 2037, the US behavioral health workforce will have a deficit of over 30,000 social workers, highlighting the need for licensure pathways that expand workforce entry (NCHWA, 2024). Racial and ethnic disparities in representation further compound workforce shortages.

Race and Ethnicity Disparities in the LCSW Workforce

Among LCSWs in California, only 29.6% are Hispanic/Latino and 6.8% are Black, perhaps revealing barriers to licensure access for underrepresented groups (California Department of Health Care Access and Information [HCAI], 2023). Over the past 30 years, Hispanic LCSWs have seen a 25% increase, while Black LCSWs have grown by only 3%, demonstrating slow progress toward a more representative workforce (HCAI, 2023). However, white, non-Hispanic LCSWs remain disproportionately overrepresented in the workforce. In San Diego County, for example, white, non-Hispanic LCSWs make up 62% of the workforce, despite only 41% of the county's population being white (HCAI, 2023; Johnson et al., 2025; U.S. Census Bureau, 2024). Statewide, 40% of Californians are Hispanic/Latino, yet only 29.6% of LCSWs identify as Hispanic/Latino (HCAI, 2023; Johnson et al., 2025). See Figures 1 and 2 for the California LCSW workforce and general population disparities.

These gaps are not isolated but reflect broader structural challenges within the licensure process that limit access for diverse candidates and restrict communities' ability to receive culturally responsive care (O'Keefe et al., 2021). Addressing these disparities requires systemic reforms to improve licensure accessibility and ensure the workforce better reflects the populations it serves (Apgar & Nienow, 2022; O'Keefe et al., 2021).

Figure 1. *California LCSW Workforce Data by Race and Ethnicity (HCAI, 2023)**Figure 2. *San Diego Area LCSW Workforce Data by Race and Ethnicity (HCAI, 2023)**

*NH=Non-Hispanic, AR=Any Race

Future Workforce Demographics

Qualified, well-trained, licensed clinical social workers help build trust and provide communities with the high standard of care they deserve (Cellini & Pavani, 2024; Thomeer et al., 2023). Research has shown that racially minoritized patients who are matched with mental health providers of the same racial or ethnic background report better perceptions of care and improved health outcomes (Moore et al., 2023). This is imperative for the social work profession because it highlights a practical solution to begin addressing the historical and ongoing disparities in mental health care within communities of color.

Similarly, many schools of social work that are educating and training future mental health clinicians are seeing demographic changes reflected in their student bodies. For example, the San Diego State University School of Social Work, where the authors teach, has seen a 15% increase in the number of Black, Latine, and Indigenous students enrolled in their MSW program over the last four years (Analytic Studies & Institutional Research [ASIR], 2024). Moreover, many of these students may also hold additional marginalized identities, such as being LGBTQ+, disabled, or foreign-born, which can further shape their experiences in both education and licensure processes.

The increase in potential future LCSWs of color and the mental health provider shortage put the social work profession at a crossroads in being able to make meaningful changes at the community level. Unfortunately, BIPOC LCSW candidates' pass rates are significantly lower than those of their white colleagues (Kim & Joo, 2024). The Council of Social Work Education's decision to eliminate the use of licensure pass rates as a reportable program outcome reflects a recognition of exam bias and the need for a more equitable approach to licensure (Apgar & Nienow, 2022). The ASWB exam disparities are discussed below.

Association of Social Work Boards Disproportionality

Standardized testing has a long history of being used to assess students' knowledge, including maintaining systemic inequities and the oppression of historically marginalized communities. For example, the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) has been widely accepted among college admissions despite evidence that it disproportionately affects students from low-income backgrounds, BIPOC communities, and those whose first language is not English (Rosales & Walker, 2021). These disparities have prompted ongoing debates about the fairness and effectiveness of standardized tests in measuring true academic potential and preparedness. In 2021, the ASWB contracted with a third-party human resources research organization to thoroughly analyze the social work licensing exam pass rate data focused on LCSW candidates' demographic information (BBS, 2022). The BBS found that the number of test takers has more than doubled in 10 years, from 9,100 in 2011 to 20,657 in 2021. Of test takers, white females are the largest group, and males are underrepresented at about 13% of first-time test-takers. Pass rates are highest amongst first-time white test-takers (83.9%) and decline for non-white test-takers, with the lowest pass rate for Black test-takers at 45% (BBS, 2022). To address significantly disparate outcomes in pass rates, in 2022, the ASWB Board of Directors launched a call to action to assess factors in pass

rate variability, revisit the exam structure to increase equity in pass rates, and solicit input from stakeholders (BBS, 2022). Gathering stakeholder input to explore these issues is an initial step in the call to action aimed at addressing disparities, an effort this paper seeks to support.

Practitioner and Systemic Gatekeeping

Given that systemic gatekeeping in the social work licensure process, whether intentional, disproportionately impacts practitioners and the communities they aim to serve, it is necessary to explore more equitable approaches to licensure. Social work programs and educators are well-positioned to lead these discussions and develop solutions that help address these disparities. As a starting point, we briefly examine how current licensure requirements fail to adequately reflect the economic and social realities faced by today's social work students and post-MSW/LCSW candidates. Please note, for this paper, we are only highlighting the financial hardship of the cumulative costs leading up to the ASWB clinical social work licensure exam, and that barriers are cumulative, with initial licensure often filtering out candidates who might otherwise succeed with the proper support. Moreover, we are not advocating changes to supervision/work requirements for licensure.

Economic Realities

The cost of the ASWB exam, which varies depending on the level of licensure sought, can be a significant stressor for candidates who are still managing the costs associated with their MSW education and may not be fully aware of the associated costs of the licensing process following their MSW education. For example, candidates must consider the cost of state-specific exams, study materials, and supervised hours toward licensure. New social workers in the field can expect to receive clinical supervision hours toward licensure at their place of employment. However, they sometimes receive lower pay to account for agencies having to utilize a licensed colleague to provide the required hours of weekly supervision (Mojozy, 2025). Other candidates may have to pay for supervision independently, with the fee for supervised hours set by an LCSW practitioner who is usually working in a private practice setting (Mojozy, 2025). These fees can vary widely. In California, 104 clinical supervision weeks are the minimum required for licensure, and supervision expenses, in total, could cost candidates between \$5,200 and \$26,000 (hourly rates approximately \$50 to \$250, respectively; Mojozy, 2025). Further, candidates may reduce their work hours or take unpaid leave to focus on exam preparation (Walker & Bruhn, 2024). Coupling these costs with the potential loss of income during exam preparation, time off for testing, and travel expenses, the financial stress may become a systemic barrier to licensure. Moreover, the cumulative financial impact of the licensure process can put undue pressure on candidates to pass the licensing exam on the first attempt amid fears of having to pay additional fees or loss of income to retake the exam. This can lead to increased stress and reduced preparation time, impacting a candidate's exam performance and effectively keeping them from clinical licensure despite sometimes years of frontline experience and knowledge (Bloxom & Anderson, 2023; National Conference

of State Legislatures, 2020). Not to mention that failure to pass the licensure exam may also result in delayed employment, loss of job offers for some graduates, and even loss of employment, adding to the stakes and stress of the exam process (Nelson et al., 2025). These added financial burdens, combined with existing systemic barriers and economic disparities, can reduce BIPOC candidates' participation in the licensure process and worsen pass rate disparities. This highlights a broader systemic issue that disproportionately impacts BIPOC and other marginalized individuals, while also demonstrating the need for proactive and transparent advising within MSW programs to help students anticipate and plan for the full scope of licensure-related expenses.

Societal Realities

In addition to economic barriers, language and accessibility challenges can impact candidates during the licensure process. ASWB exams are given only in English, which can contribute to the stress of the licensure process for English as a Second Language (ESL) candidates. These candidates must also navigate the complexities of the English language while processing exam questions, thus leaving them disadvantaged. Torres and colleagues (2024) found that ESL candidates may experience slower test-taking, affecting exam performance and lowering pass rates. While the ASWB offers qualifying candidates up to two extra hours for exams, and candidates may request a bilingual translation dictionary and/or one English dictionary, some states do not permit using these or accept scores from candidates who used ESL accommodations for their exam (ASWB, 2024). The lack of ESL support not only decreases the opportunities for ESL candidates to continue in the field of social work as licensed clinicians but also has the potential to limit the cultural and linguistic diversity of the social work workforce, which is essential for serving multicultural and multilingual communities.

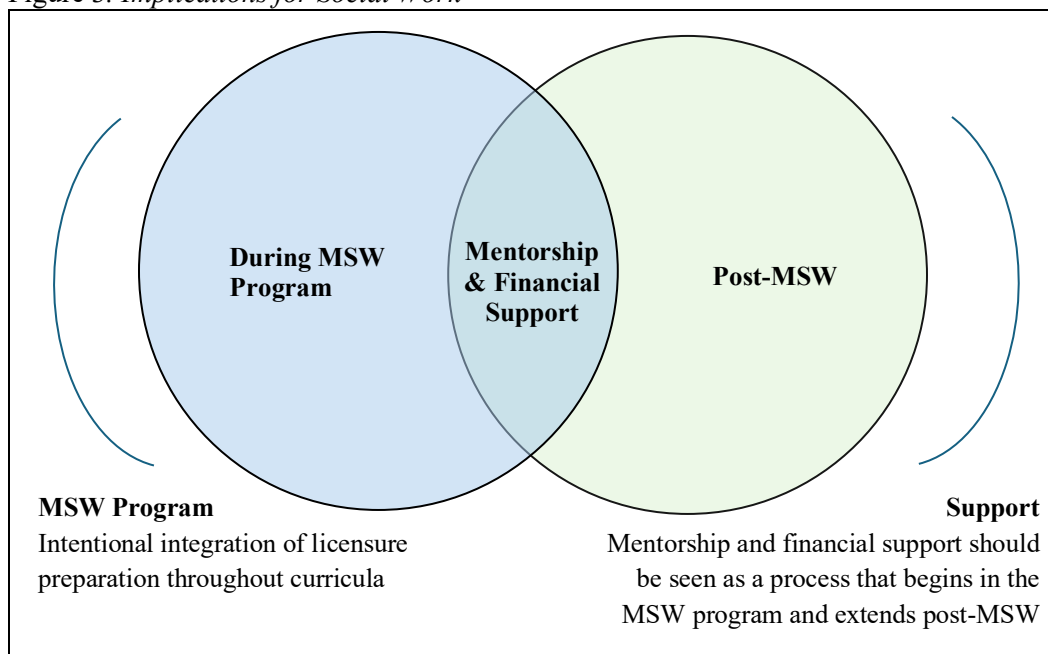
Candidates with disabilities also face insufficient accommodations during the licensure process. While the ASWB cooperates with state licensing boards to provide non-standard testing arrangements for those with disabilities or chronic health conditions, alternative testing methods are often limited in scope and fail to fully address their diverse needs (ASWB, 2024). For BIPOC candidates with disabilities, the challenges of navigating the licensure process can be further exacerbated by experiences of racism and ableism. While helpful for some, standard accommodations such as extended time, additional breaks, or separate distraction-free testing rooms do not account for the varying needs of candidates with more specialized disabilities, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds (Association of Social Work Boards [ASWB], 2025). Moreover, it is at the discretion of the ASWB to approve accommodations for non-federally protected disabilities, which can create inconsistencies in the accommodations provided. This further intensifies the disparities that BIPOC candidates face throughout the licensing process and leads to inconsistencies for candidates who may not qualify under federal guidelines but still face challenges.

Implications for Social Work

MSW Education Programs

The CSWE requires social work programs to advance anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion (ADEI) practice and principles throughout a program's curriculum. Further, the NASW *Code of Ethics* calls upon social workers to "strive to ensure access to needed information, services, and resources; equality of opportunity; and meaningful participation in decision making for all people" (NASW, 2021, p. 2). Similarly, one of the Grand Challenges of Social Work is eliminating *racism* (Teasley et al., 2021). Given these guidelines and calls to action to address systemic racism, it is important to confront the inequities that contribute to disparities in licensure pass rates. Moreover, the ASWB licensure exam, as currently designed, may not reflect these same principles, creating a disconnect that students must navigate. The ASWB has collaborated with social work educators to improve the licensure pathway for graduates (Apgar & Luquet, 2023). Though we recognize that schools of social work play a fundamental role in teaching the skills, knowledge, and attitudes needed to be effective ADEI clinical practitioners, it should be noted that addressing the structural flaws in the ASWB should not be the responsibility of social work education programs.

Figure 3. *Implications for Social Work*



With that said, we do believe social work programs are uniquely positioned to play an active role in both supporting marginalized students through their MSW program and helping students achieve licensure post-MSW. To that end, we offer some strategies that social work programs could implement to help improve licensure pass rates, within the

constraints of the current ASWB exam. These strategies include (1) integrating licensure preparation into MSW education curriculum, and (2) providing mentorship and financial support throughout the licensure process, from MSW education to becoming an LCSW candidate, to better support the needs of BIPOC and other candidates facing structural barriers (e.g., disabled, foreign-born, etc.). See Figure 3.

MSW Education Curricula

Even though the 2022 CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) brought a growing recognition of the importance of an inclusive, ADEI intentional and focused curriculum, and the CSWE also went as far as eliminating licensure passing rates as an acceptable program outcome, CSWE has yet to address licensing gatekeeping sufficiently (Beasley et al., 2022; Bryant & Kolivoski, 2021; Davis & Mirick, 2022; Lerner & Kim, 2024). For example, the structure of social work education has often been slow to adapt to the evolving needs of the profession, particularly concerning the systemic inequities that BIPOC and other marginalized students face, such as experiencing racial bias and ableism, limited access to mental health resources that understand and address racial trauma, higher financial burdens due to socioeconomic disparities, and curricula that inadequately address or even perpetuate racial injustices. While there is an increasing emphasis on social justice and anti-racist practices, many social work programs have not fully integrated these principles beyond their minimum requirements (Bryant & Kolivoski, 2021). This gap leaves students underprepared to navigate and challenge the institutional barriers they will encounter in their licensure and careers. Further, this can disproportionately impact BIPOC students, who may not have access to external resources or support systems that could otherwise help them navigate the nuances of ASWB licensure exams.

Social work programs can aim to integrate licensure preparation into curricula using the ADEI principles outlined in the 2022 EPAS. This approach could help prepare students for the critical thinking skills necessary to navigate the licensure process. For example, in direct practice or clinical-focused courses, instructors could incorporate case vignettes that mirror the content from the ASWB clinical exam, including human development, diversity, and behavior in the environment (Fisher & Setterlund, 2018). By including these exercises throughout the curricula, students could be better prepared for the critical thinking necessary for the ASWB exam while gaining practical, real-world skills essential for serving diverse communities.

However, without some intentionality on behalf of social work education programs to examine how their current curricula may help or hinder students post-MSW, we may continue to see candidates struggling to pass their licensure exams on their first attempt, increasing the existing disparities in licensure pass rates. By incorporating resources such as test-taking strategies and integrating areas covered in ASWB exams throughout core curricula, social work programs can help address some of the known gaps that disproportionately impact BIPOC and other marginalized students. A strategy some universities use includes adding a one-unit graduate course focused on preparation for the cumulative experience of the comprehensive exam, which parallels the licensure exam.

This course may increase students' confidence in passing the licensure exam. For schools of social work considering implementing this strategy, we encourage hiring BIPOC LCSWs to be the instructors on record. Please note that the authors do not know how widespread these types of one-unit courses are across social work programs in the US.

Mentorship Throughout the Licensure Process

MSW Education Mentorship

BIPOC candidates often face systemic challenges that begin well before and persist throughout their graduate social work education. These challenges include educational disparities rooted in implicit and cultural biases, microaggressions, and a lack of institutional support (Barrita et al., 2023). These inequities are compounded during the licensure process, where BIPOC candidates report feeling that the ASWB exam content is biased toward white cultural norms, creating additional barriers (Torres et al., 2024). Further, many BIPOC candidates struggle with an exam that reflects experiences and expectations disconnected from their lived realities (Bloxom & Anderson, 2023; Torres et al., 2024). Mentorship plays a critical role in this process. Offering professional development, advocacy, and a support system that includes career advice, networking opportunities, emotional support, mentorship, and resources can help BIPOC students address challenges and navigate systemic barriers (Allen & Joseph, 2018; Bimper, 2017; Tibbetts & Parks Smith, 2023).

Post-MSW Mentorship

Higher education can support mentorship opportunities during and even after graduation. We highlight two examples of mentorship that can span one's academic career. First, the University of Portland's BUDDY-UP program is a peer-mentorship initiative in their School of Nursing and Health Innovations (Majors et al., 2022). It intentionally matches students based on shared backgrounds, such as race, ethnicity, and being first-generation college students, allowing mentors and mentees to connect on shared experiences and navigate academic and social challenges more effectively (Majors et al., 2022). Social work programs could similarly utilize community partnerships established through field education to create formal mentorship initiatives that engage students more actively. These partnerships could provide students access to a broader range of mentors who bring diverse experiences and perspectives, particularly those who understand the specific challenges faced by BIPOC students. Second, San Diego State University's School of Social Work received a grant to provide post-graduation mentorship support by funding the supervision required for licensure for MSW post-graduates who are working at nonprofit organizations (Sklar, 2023). By connecting recent graduates with experienced mentors who can offer guidance in clinical practice and exam preparation, social work programs help ensure that BIPOC graduates receive sustained support as they navigate the challenges of licensure requirements. Such initiatives address practical needs, such as acquiring supervision hours, and provide culturally responsive mentorship.

Access to these types of tailored mentorship throughout one's MSW and post-MSW education efforts brings invaluable insights and can potentially reduce the stress that many BIPOC and other marginalized candidates face later in their professional journey, thus, perhaps improving their likelihood of passing on their first attempt. This in turn can lead to higher student satisfaction, improved retention rates, and more robust overall program outcomes. By connecting BIPOC candidates with mentors who understand and can address their specific needs, social work programs can begin to address some of the systemic inequities inherent in the current ASWB exam structure that have historically disadvantaged BIPOC individuals.

Financial Support Throughout the Licensure Process

MSW Education

CSWE has also formally recognized the financial burden on students by supporting initiatives such as Payment for Placements (P4P), which aims to reduce the cost of social work education through paid internships (CSWE, 2024). Many accredited social work programs require students to complete unpaid practicum hours, further exacerbating financial hardships, particularly for BIPOC students who already face significant student loan debt. A 2020 report found that Black and Hispanic social workers graduate with disproportionately higher debt compared to their white peers, with Black graduates averaging \$92,000 in student loans and Hispanic graduates averaging \$79,000 (CSWE, 2020).

Universities and practicum sites have responded creatively to the call for greater student support by providing resources such as parking vouchers, mileage reimbursements, necessary technology, and even stipends to offset internship costs (CSWE, 2022). Some practicum sites have even incorporated internship wages into their grant funding or offered employment-based practicums (CSWE, 2022). Legislative efforts are also being made, such as Michigan's Student Mental Health Apprenticeship Retention and Training (SMART) grant program, which provides paid internships for social workers interning within public school settings (Student Mental Health Apprenticeship Retention and Training [SMART] Internship Grant Program, 2022). P4P continues to advocate for paid internships at the local, state, and federal levels to ensure that social work students are fairly compensated (P4P, 2024).

Another approach could be implementing forgivable loans or work-study programs tied into service commitments, similar to the Title IV-E Stipend Program, which many MSW programs already have in place. Title IV-E Stipend Program helps alleviate the financial stress many MSW students face well after graduation, while ensuring that students gain applicable hands-on experience in child welfare social work (California Department of Social Services, 2024). Implementing something similar for current MSW students and licensure candidates would offer substantial benefits. For example, students could receive funding in exchange for a commitment to high-demand areas such as mental health or substance abuse services, including rural communities often faced with a critical shortage of mental health providers (Morales et al., 2020). This approach would help

reduce the economic barriers to licensure and encourage graduates to contribute to areas of social work where their skills are most needed, further aligning with the profession's commitment to social justice and equity. This could also include offering stipends to students from rural or underserved communities in exchange for returning to their communities to provide mental health and additional community support services (Nelson & Lang-Lindsey, 2020).

These types of programs could significantly improve access to mental health care in underserved communities while ensuring that social work students from these areas are supported throughout their licensure journey. By engaging in community partnerships and offering forgivable loans or work-study opportunities, social work programs are not only helping to create a more equitable pathway to licensure but are ensuring that students and future licensure candidates are prepared to enter the field of social work with the necessary skills, experience, and knowledge.

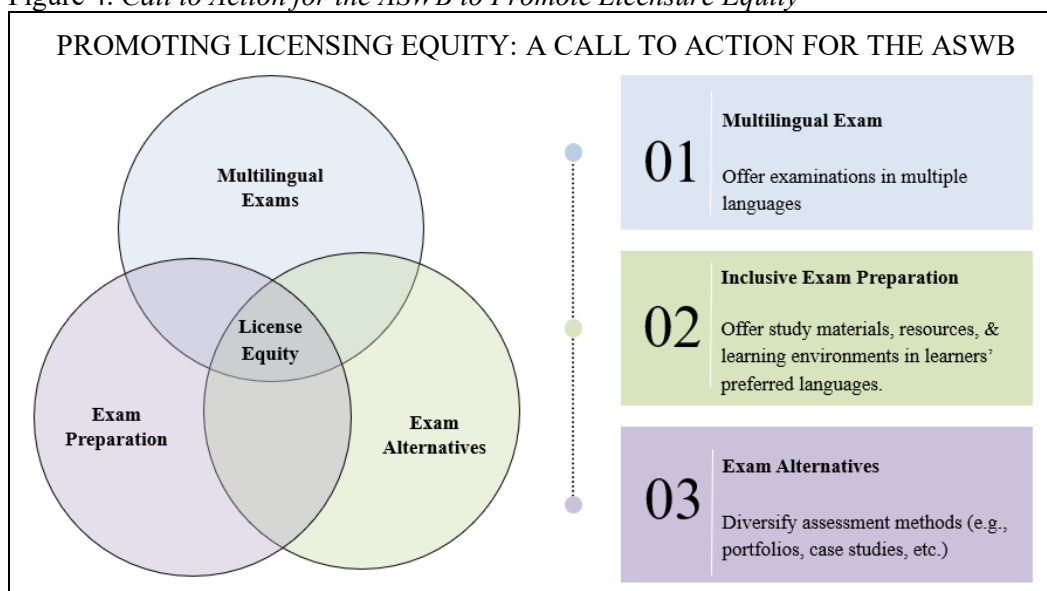
Post-MSW Financial Support

In addition to the financial strain of unpaid practicum hours, students face further economic barriers when accounting for the cost associated with licensure. These combined expenses can act as significant economic gatekeepers to successful licensure. To challenge this, social work programs should prioritize developing and implementing financial support designed to reduce economic barriers to licensure. Establishing scholarships and grants for alumni facing financial hardship could alleviate the future costs of licensure-related expenses, including ASWB exam registration fees, study materials, and supervision hours required for clinical licensure.

Social work programs should also explore innovative strategies that could financially support students and future licensure candidates. For example, social work programs could establish funding partnerships with local agencies, health and mental health foundations, and alumni networks. These partnerships can result in the development of scholarships explicitly aimed at supporting future licensure candidates, including BIPOC candidates who may face additional economic barriers, such as wealth and employment gaps (Aliprantis & Carroll, 2019; Gramozi et al., 2023). Reducing the financial burden on students allows them to focus on their studies and exam preparation, increasing their chances of passing the ASWB exam on the first attempt.

Calls to Action for ASWB to Promote Licensing Equity

We offer several ideas on how the ASWB can begin to take action to address the current LCSW exam rate disparities and promote licensing equity. See Figure 4.

Figure 4. *Call to Action for the ASWB to Promote Licensure Equity*

Multilingual Exams

Implementing multilingual exam options is a tangible step toward dismantling the systemic barriers that have historically disadvantaged ESL candidates. By providing licensure exams in multiple languages, the ASWB can ensure that all LCSW candidates have an equal opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and skills, regardless of their linguistic background, especially if these future LCSW practitioners will serve the communities in their native language. This would also include collaboration at the state level to work towards nationwide acceptance. This approach promotes equity within the licensure process and aligns with social work's broader commitment to ADEI efforts.

Having a comprehensive policy framework would support the implementation of multilingual exam options. This policy should include clear guidelines for ensuring translation accuracy, cultural relevance, and the consistent application of multilingual options to maintain the integrity and fairness of the exams. A key model for such an initiative is the Dental Assisting National Board (DANB), which in January 2024 began offering its most-taken oral health credentialing exam in Spanish as a move towards addressing workforce shortages, barriers to employment, and community needs (American Dental Association, 2023). The ASWB should draw on this example of the DANB to develop a nationwide strategy that accommodates the diverse linguistic backgrounds of LCSW candidates in the US.

Inclusive Exam Preparation

Many state chapters of NASW offer LCSW candidates ASWB exam preparation; however, these services are not always tailored to the specific needs of BIPOC and ESL

candidates (Bloxom & Anderson, 2023). To address this, the ASWB could collaborate with NASW state chapters to expand current exam preparation resources that specifically consider the challenges faced by BIPOC and other marginalized candidates. This includes developing culturally relevant study materials, including bilingual instructors, study resources for ESL candidates, and preparation courses. Preparation courses should offer interactive practice exams and peer support groups that allow LCSW candidates to share resources and strategies. By improving accessibility, these expanded resources can better support BIPOC and ESL candidates, ensuring they are equipped with the tools they need to succeed on the ASWB exam.

Alternatives to the Clinical Licensing Exam

Recognizing the limitations of standardized testing, the ASWB and state licensing entities should explore alternative pathways to licensure. Portfolios could comprehensively evaluate an LCSW candidate's abilities by capturing the skills and knowledge that are not always transferable to standardized tests (Hirsch et al., 2024). LCSW candidates would show evidence of their competencies through case vignettes, self-reflection essays, and references from supervisors, mentors, and colleagues. Furthermore, simulations would provide an interactive way to assess an LCSW candidate's ability to apply theoretical and clinical knowledge in real-world scenarios, testing decision-making skills and ethical judgments that mimic real-world scenarios and client interactions (Kourgiantakis et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2020).

An example of an alternative licensing is Illinois Public Act 103-433, also known as Illinois House Bill 2365 (HB2365). The initiative started as a grassroots movement from the social work activist group #StopASWB, which focuses on inequity within social work (NASW-Illinois Chapter, 2023). Illinois' HB2365 provides a structured alternative to the ASWB clinical licensing exam and allows candidates who have attempted the ASWB clinical licensing at least once to qualify for licensure through the completion of an additional 3,000 hours of supervised professional experience (Illinois Department of Financial and Professional Regulation, 2024). While this pathway aims to address disparities associated with standardized testing, there is currently limited research on its long-term impact, as HB2365 only went into effect on January 1, 2024 (NASW-Illinois Chapter, 2023). By emphasizing supervised professional experience, HB2365 acknowledges the diverse competencies social workers develop through hands-on practice, challenging the notion that exam performance should be the sole determinant of licensure. However, given the potential financial and logistical burdens associated with completing these hours, future research should examine how HB2365 affects LCSW candidates' financial stability, career advancement, and overall professional development to ensure that it does not create new barriers while attempting to dismantle existing ones (Hirsch et al., 2024; NASW-Illinois Chapter, 2023).

Conclusion

Social work education programs can meaningfully support students throughout the licensure process from MSW through LCSW, which could diversify the future workforce

and be a strong predictor of increasing services to marginalized populations. While we recognize that universities and social work programs often face resource limitations, we strongly encourage them to systematically evaluate these areas and adopt strategies tailored to their specific needs. Moreover, we recognize that this paper does not deeply explore the impact of these barriers on real people and communities. For this reason, additional research, resources, advocacy, and continued academic discourse on the systematic barriers embedded in the licensure process and exam are warranted.

However, even with strong institutional support like mentorship, financial assistance, and exam prep, it depends on ASWB's responsiveness to critiques of the exam and systemic change. Some of the proposed strategies may have limited long-term impact without broader reform or alternatives to the current licensure model. The current LCSW licensing process presents significant barriers. State licensing entities and ASWB control the exam content and how it is completed and ultimately hold the responsibility for creating an exam that results in equitable pass rates for all LCSW candidates. The decisions being made regarding licensure policies will shape the future of the social work workforce and determine how effectively it can meet the diverse needs of communities. Addressing these issues now is critical for building a social work workforce that reflects the diversity of the communities it serves. We strongly recommend that the ASWB explore using multilingual exams, inclusive examination preparation, financial resources, or relief for candidates, as well as alternatives to the current licensing exam. These efforts are not just about improving licensure pass rates; they represent a commitment to addressing systemic inequities that have long excluded marginalized groups from full participation in the profession.

References

- Allen, E. L., & Joseph, N. M. (2018). [The Sistah Network: Enhancing the educational and social experiences of Black women in the academy](#). *NASPA Journal About Women in Higher Education*, 11(2), 151-170.
- Aliprantis, D., & Carroll, D. R. (2019). [What is behind the persistence of the racial wealth gap?](#) *Economic Commentary*, 2019(03), 1-6.
- American Dental Association. (2023, September 25). [Dental assisting national board to offer its most popular exam in Spanish in 2024](#). *ADA News*.
- Analytic Studies & Institutional Research. (2024). [Tableau server](#). San Diego State University.
- Apgar, D., & Luquet, W. (2023). [Linking social work licensing exam content to educational competencies: Poor reliability challenges the path to licensure](#). *Research on Social Work Practice*, 33(1), 66-75.
- Apgar, D., & Nienow, M. (2022). [Critical time in regulation of social work practice: Forging a path forward](#). *Research on Social Work Practice*, 33(1), 3-4.
- Association of Social Work Boards [ASWB]. (2024). [Nonstandard testing arrangements handbook](#). Author.
- ASWB. (2025). *Nonstandard testing arrangements handbook*. Author.

- Barrita, A., Hixson, K., Kachen, A., Wong-Padoongpatt, G., & Krishen, A. (2023). Centering the margins: A moderation study examining cisgender privilege among LGBTQ+ BIPOC college students facing intersectional microaggressions. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, 11(4), 563-573.
- Beasley, C. C., Singh, M. I., & Drechsler, K. (2022). Antiracism and equity-mindedness in social work field education: A systematic review. *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work*, 31, 173-185.
- Bimper, A. Y., Jr. (2017). Mentorship of Black student-athletes at a predominantly White American university: Critical race theory perspective on student-athlete development. *Sport, Education and Society*, 22(2), 175-193.
- Bloxom, Q., & Anderson, B. (2023). Deconstructing social work exam bias: Advocacy practice guidelines to close the gap. *Journal of Evidence-Based Social Work*, 21(2), 236-264.
- Board of Behavioral Sciences [BBS]. (2022). ASWB exam pass rate analysis report. Author.
- BBS. (2024). Guide to licensure requirements: Licensed clinical social worker—Out-of-state and out-of-country candidates. Author.
- Bryant, D., & Kolivoski, K. M. (2021). The stories we tell: Examining the persistence and impacts of normative-whiteness and white supremacy within social work education. *Advances in Social Work*, 21(2-3), 481-499.
- California Department of Health Care Access and Information [HCAI]. (2023). Race & ethnicity of California's health workforce. Author.
- California Department of Social Services. (2024). Child welfare training Title IV-E stipend. Author.
- Cellini, G., & Pavani, L. (2024). Training social workers at the master's degree level: The Italian case. *Social Work Education, Latest Articles*, 1-15.
- Council on Social Work Education [CSWE]. (2020). The social work profession: Findings from three years of surveys of new social workers. Author.
- CSWE. (2022). 2022 EPAS and licensing exam pass rates. Author.
- CSWE. (2023). 2022-2023 Statistics on social work education in the United States: Summary of the CSWE annual survey of social work programs. Author.
- CSWE. (2024, September 13). CSWE and P4P commit to addressing accessibility in social work education. Author. <https://www.cswe.org/news/newsroom/cswe-and-p4p-commit-to-addressing-accessibility/>
- Davis, A., & Mirick, R. G. (2022). Microaggressions in social work education: Learning from BSW students' experiences. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 58(3), 431-448.

- Fisher, C., & Setterlund, K. (2018). [Vignette-based skills assessment in social work field education: Evaluating students' achievement of professional competency](#). *Field Scholar*, 8(1), 1-15.
- Flagg, L. D., & Campbell, L. A. (2021). [COVID-19 in communities of color: Structural racism and social determinants of health](#). *Online Journal of Issues in Nursing*, 26(2), 1-11.
- Gramozi, A., Palivos, T., & Zachariadis, M. (2023). [Measuring the welfare costs of racial discrimination in the labor market](#). *Economic Inquiry*, 61(2), 232-252.
- Greiner, A. C., & Knebel, E. (Eds.). (2003). [Health professions oversight processes: What they do and do not do, and what they could do](#). In *Health professions education: A bridge to quality* (pp. 97-120). National Academies Press.
- Hirsch, J., DeCarlo, M., Lewis, A., & Walker, C. (2024). [Alternative pathways to social work licensure: A critical review and social equity policy analysis](#). *Journal of Evidence-Based Social Work*, 21(2), 177-198.
- Illinois Department of Financial and Professional Regulation. (2024). [LCSW exam alternative IL P.A. 103-433](#).
- Johnson, H., Cuellar Mejia, M., & McGhee, E. (2025, January). [California's population](#). Public Policy Institute of California.
- Kim, J., & Joo, M. (2024). [The effects of race/ethnicity on clinical exam outcomes: Diminished \(yet persistent\) effects when other determinants are controlled. Prepared for ASWB](#). ASWB.
- Kourgiantakis, T., Sewell, K. M., Hu, R., Logan, J., & Bogo, M. (2020). [Simulation in social work education: A scoping review](#). *Research on Social Work Practice*, 30(4), 433-450.
- Lee, E., Kourgiantakis, T., & Bogo, M. (2020). [Translating knowledge into practice: Using simulation to enhance mental health competence through social work education](#). *Social Work Education*, 39(3), 329-349.
- Lerner, J. E., & Kim, A. (2024). ["The air is being sucked out of the room": Experiences of social work students of color with antiracism education in the classroom and practicum](#). *Social Work Research*, 48(2), 73-87.
- Majors, E., Raber, A. M., Garrigues, L., & Moceri, J. (2022). [Peer-mentoring: A call to create inclusive programs to support all students' ability to be successful](#). *Journal of Nursing Education*, 61(11), 633-635.
- Mojozy. (2025). [Mental health clinical supervision fees: What pre-licensed, license-eligible, and provisionally licensed clinical supervisees should know](#). Author.
- Moore, C., Coates, E., Watson, A., de Heer, R., McLeod, A., & Prudhomme, A. (2023). ["It's important to work with people that look like me": Black patients' preferences for patient-provider race concordance](#). *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities*, 10(5), 2552-2564.

- Morales, D. A., Barksdale, C. L., & Beckel-Mitchener, A. C. (2020). [A call to action to address rural mental health disparities](#). *Journal of Clinical and Translational Science*, 4(5), 463-467.
- National Association of Social Workers [NASW]. (2021). [Code of ethics](#). Author.
- NASW. (2024, May 17). [NASW submits comments to the U.S. Department of Education concerning student debt relief](#). Author.
- NASW-Illinois Chapter. (2023, August 4). [Learn more about social work exam alternative law HB2365 SAI](#). Author.
- National Center for Health Workforce Analysis. (2024). [State of the behavioral health workforce, 2024](#). U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration.
- National Conference of State Legislatures. (2020). [Occupational licensing final report: Assessing state policies and practices](#). Author.
- Nelson, D., Bakoyéma, B., & Purcell, J. (2025). [Exploring social worker pay: The role of employer practice setting, licensure, and degree type](#). *Human Service Organizations: Management, Leadership & Governance*, 49(2), 135-151.
- Nelson, D. D., & Lang-Lindsey, K. (2020). [Rural healthcare and telehealth: The importance of social work departments at HBCUs in developing a competent workforce in the rural South](#). *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship*, 12(3), 39-46.
- O'Keefe, V. M., Cwik, M. F., Haroz, E. E., & Barlow, A. (2021). [Increasing culturally responsive care and mental health equity with Indigenous community mental health workers](#). *Psychological Services*, 18(1), 84-92.
- Payment for Placements [P4P]. (n.d.). [Our mission](#). Author. Retrieved August 28, 2025.
- Rosales, J., & Walker, T. (2021, March 20). [The racist beginnings of standardized testing](#). *NEA Today*.
- Sklar, D. L. (2023, November 15). [SDSU School of Social Work gets \\$1.24M grant from Prebys Foundation](#). Times of San Diego.
- [Student Mental Health Apprenticeship Retention and Training \(SMART\) Internship Grant Program, Mich. Comp. Laws §§ 388.1951–.1957](#) (2022).
- Teasley, M. L., McCarter, S., Woo, B., Conner, L. R., Spencer, M. S., & Green, T. (2021, April). [Grand challenge: Eliminate racism](#) (Working Paper No. 26). Grand Challenges for Social Work.
- Thomeer, M. B., Moody, M. D., & Yahirun, J. (2023). [Racial and ethnic disparities in mental health and mental health care during the COVID-19 pandemic](#). *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities*, 10(2), 961-976.

- Tibbetts, E., & Parks Smith, K. (2023). [Beyond “a good fit”: Examining effective mentorship for BIPOC practitioners in a predominantly White profession](#). *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 35(1), 46-62.
- Torres, M. E., Maguire, S., & Kogan, J. (2024). [“I was told to think like a middle-aged White woman”: A survey on identity and the Association of Social Work Boards exam](#). *Social Work*, 69(2), 185-196.
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). [QuickFacts: San Diego city, California](#). U.S. Department of Commerce.
- Walker, M., & Bruhn, C. (2024). [Perspectives of African American social workers regarding clinical licensure](#). *Journal of Evidence-Based Social Work*, 21(2), 145-161.
- Zippia. (2025). [Clinical social worker demographics and statistics in the U.S.](#). Author.

Author note: Address correspondence to Kayla M. Whaley, 5500 Campanile Drive, San Diego, CA 92182-4119 Email: mmwhaley@sdsu.edu

ORCID

Kayla M. Whaley

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-8784-1610>

Shelly Paule

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-1457-5508>

Annie J. Keeney

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0318-9772>