



National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (NCCAOM®) Fact Sheet:

Information for California Licensed Acupuncturists and Other Interested Stakeholders about the NCCAOM Testing and Certification Program

Updated 3/22/16

Introduction:

As a result of the interest by various California stakeholder groups and the more recent recommendation from the [Assembly Committee on Business and Professions](#) for exploration of the potential use of the NCCAOM entry-level certification examinations as one of the entry-level requirements for licensure in California, the NCCAOM has prepared this fact sheet to familiarize California stakeholders with the development, administration, reliability and validity of the NCCAOM examinations. This fact sheet also describes the Commission's longstanding partnership with state regulatory boards and agencies responsible for licensing acupuncturists throughout the United States.

The NCCAOM examinations and certification programs are based on best practices in the certification industry and meet the testing and certification program standards of the [National Commission on Certifying Agencies \(NCCA\)](#), an independent accreditation commission of [the Institute for Credentialing Excellence](#).

Questions or comments related to this fact sheet should be directed to Dr. Kory Ward-Cook, Chief Executive Officer, at kwardcook@thenccaom.org.

Q. (1). How have the NCCAOM examinations changed since 2003 when the exams were first evaluated by the California Little Hoover Commission?)



A. (1) Since 2003, based on data obtained from the [2003](#), [2008](#), and [2013 Job Task Analyses](#) (i.e., also known as an occupational analysis (OA) or practice analysis), the NCCAOM has made extensive changes and significant improvements to its examination and certification processes, including:

- Created a modular examination system (consisting of four modules: ***Foundations of Oriental Medicine, Acupuncture with Point Location, Chinese Herbology, and Biomedicine***) at the request of states, because of varying scope of practice laws, ensuring that candidates have successfully passed each content area before achieving certification.
- Introduced the Oriental Medicine Certification program, which requires passing all four exams.
- Created and implemented the Biomedicine examination in June 2004 and required all candidates to pass this examination as a requirement for certification; in 2010, as a result of the [2008 Job Analysis Survey](#), the NCCAOM increased the content of the Biomedicine exam from a 50-item exam to a 100-item exam.
- Validated Knowledge-Skills-Abilities (KSAs) and subsequently added competency statements. These are reflected in the development and publication of all examination content outlines since 2008. The [latest 2013 Job Task Analysis](#) and the [2016 Exam Content Outlines](#) are available on the [NCCAOM website](#).

Q. (2) What changes have occurred regarding the administration of the NCCAOM examinations since 2003?

A. (2) In 2007, the NCCAOM changed the certification exams administration format to computer adaptive tests (CAT), which not only improves examination psychometric reliability, but also further reduces the potential for cheating (memorizing test questions) by minimizing test question exposure, since every examinee receives a unique set of examination questions based on the test specification requirements and the tester’s response to each new test item on the exam. The CAT administrative model is both a more reliable measure of competency and a very



desirable administrative test model for candidates, since each examination completed by the test taker can be scored in real time, and thus a preliminary “pass” or “fail” screen is generated once the test taker completes the examination. NCCAOM examinations are now administered year-round in highly secure professional test centers, throughout the U.S. and around the world. Year-round testing enables candidates that are approved to test by the NCCAOM to register for the NCCAOM examination(s) throughout the year (typically Monday through Friday during normal business hours), pending availability at their desired Pearson VUE Professional Test Center locations. These professional test centers hire only Pearson VUE employees, construct each center with the identical specifications, they are in fact owned and operated by [Pearson VUE®](#). Candidate identity is confirmed by means of palm vein readings and photo identifications. Tight internal test administration processes, which include camera surveillance of each test taker, prevent cheating during the examination process. The NCCAOM follows up with an internal quality control procedure, and the final test results are sent to the examinee within ten business days. The NCCAOM generates official exam results reports, which are sent directly the state regulatory boards upon the examinee’s request. The CAT exam administration model allows for year-round testing with a location convenient to examinees. Most all examinees would not have to travel more than 50 miles, to reach a Pearson VUE Professional Test Center. The [2016 NCCAOM® Certification Handbook](#) and the [2016 NCCAOM® Examination Study Guides](#) provide more detailed information about the examination development and administration process.

The NCCAOM is also assisted by [Schroeder Measurement Technologies \(SMT®\)](#), a national research and psychometric services corporation that conducts professional competency assessment research, and provides examination development services and scoring of examinations for a number of credentialing programs nationwide. The NCCAOM has demonstrated over the last 30 years, with its issuance of over 27,000 certificates of certification, that it is well equipped to handle the challenges associated with the development and administration of a credible, valid, and legally defensible examination system for the acupuncture and Oriental medicine profession.



Q. (3) If the NCCAOM exams become an option or requirement for state licensure, will current California Licensed Acupuncturists then be required to take the NCCAOM exams?

A. (3) No. Adding the option or requirement of NCCAOM exams will allow *new candidates* who are *applying* for licensure in California the opportunity to take the NCCAOM exams as a route for California licensure. It will have *no* impact on currently licensed California acupuncturists.

Q. (4). If the NCCAOM exams become an option or requirement for state licensure, would current California Licensed Acupuncturists who are not certified with the NCCAOM then become NCCAOM Diplomates?

Not automatically, but the NCCAOM is interested in setting up a route to certification for currently Licensed Acupuncturists in California. The NCCAOM must abide by the requirements of the [National Commission on Certifying Agencies \(NCCA\)](#) in order to maintain accreditation of its certification programs. NCCA requires that all NCCAOM certified practitioners meet the same level of competencies which is demonstrated by meeting eligibility requirements and passing a valid and reliable examination(s). The recent audit of the NCCAOM Exam Development, Administration and Linkage Study will provide some of the data needed for the NCCAOM to request for the NCCA Board to determine if the CALE is a substantially equivalent measure of the Foundations, Biomedicine, Acupuncture with Point Locations and the Chinese Herbology Examinations combined. The psychometric data (to determine reliability and validity) will most likely need to be obtained from the Department of Consumer Affairs Office of Professional Examinations Services (OPES) for the CALE administrations during the last few years. Since California Licensed Acupuncturists have met educational and training requirements and have successfully passed an examination as a requirement for licensure, the NCCAOM would have to demonstrate that California's and NCCAOM's eligibility requirements are equivalent, and that the California Acupuncture Licensing Exam (CALE) is equivalent to the NCCAOM exams, based on a review and analysis by an independent psychometrician and designated subject matter experts. If this demonstration was met, then the NCCAOM could proceed with developing a procedure for active California Licensed Acupuncturists to become NCCAOM certified.

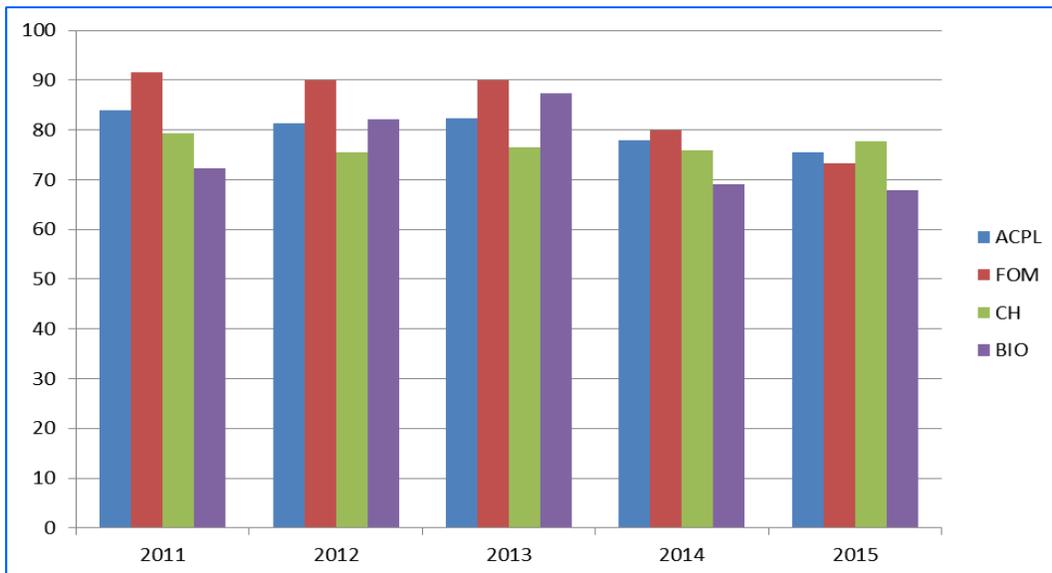
Q. (5). Aren't the NCCAOM exams "too easy"?



A. Not at all. Over the past five years, the NCCAOM has continued to build a very robust set of item banks for all its examinations, including a significant increase in the number of items with higher Bloom's Taxonomy levels and more clinical judgement questions. The NCCAOM also modified the content of the exams based on the 2008 Job Task Analysis (please see the [NCCAOM® 2008 Job Task Analysis Study: A Report to the Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine Community](#)), which has resulted in a set of modular examinations with more breadth and depth of content. As a result of these examination development activities, the amount of content tested is now 400 exam items (each 100-multiple choice exam must be independently passed to receive a certification as a Diplomate of Oriental Medicine). (The CALE covers similar content in a single comprehensive examination of 250 items.)

The latest NCCAOM examination content outlines, which are based on the 2013 Job Task Analysis, are available on the [NCCAOM website](#).

The graph below shows the exam pass rates for each of the NCCAOM examinations (Foundations of Oriental Medicine, Acupuncture with Point Location, Chinese Herbology and Biomedicine, examinations) for 2011-2015.





The exam pass rates for the individual examinations, broken down by the type of test takers, for the past three years, can be accessed via the [NCCAOM website](#) under Resources titled "[NCCAOM Examination Statistics Report](#)". In the case of the Biomedicine exam, the breadth and depth of the content has significantly increased since 2004. Since 2010 the Biomedicine examination module has been administered as a 100-item test (from 2004 through 2009 it was administered as a 50-item test).

Q. (6). Are there national standards for verification of entry-level competencies for licensed acupuncturists?

A. (6) Yes. Since 1982 the Accreditation Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (ACAOM) and the NCCAOM have established national standards leading to programmatic accreditation and certification, respectively. There are over 60 ACAOM accredited programs for acupuncture and Oriental medicine (AOM) in the U.S., and the NCCAOM currently provides examinations for licensure as an acupuncturist in 44 states, plus the District of Columbia. Every acupuncture regulatory board in the U.S. except California accepts the NCCAOM certification examinations as a measure of entry-level competency for an acupuncturist to legally practice in their state. Adherence to these standards ensures the safe and effective practice of AOM in these states. More information about national standards of competency of acupuncturists can be found via [the National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine \(NCCAOM®\) Fact Sheet: Meeting National Standards through its Examinations and Certification Process](#). For more information regarding the NCCAOM testing and certification process, please see the [National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine \(NCCAOM®\) Fact Sheet: NCCAOM Certification and Testing Program](#).

More information on NCCAOM policy and procedures can be found in the [2016 NCCAOM® Certification Handbook](#).

Q. (7). How many states that regulate acupuncture use the NCCAOM exams?

A. (7) There are 44 states plus the District of Columbia (i.e. ninety-eight percent of the states that regulate acupuncturists) that recognize NCCAOM examinations or full certification as a prerequisite for licensure. The AOM regulatory boards of these states typically require passing of two to four NCCAOM exams, or require full NCCAOM Certification in Acupuncture or Oriental



Medicine. Five states (Alabama, Kansas, Oklahoma, South Dakota, and Wyoming) currently do not have an AOM practice act. Please see the map titled [States Using NCCAOM Certification or Exams for Acupuncture Licensure](#). California is the only state that administers its own licensure examination. This means that AOM practitioners who pass the required NCCAOM examinations and/or become NCCAOM certified in Acupuncture or Oriental Medicine (and who have met state-specific requirements*) can enjoy reciprocity in all states that regulate acupuncture, except for California. In 2012, an estimated 40% of newly licensed California acupuncturists took the NCCAOM exams in addition to the CALE. In 2015, NCCAOM received 311 applications for certification from individuals enrolled in a California ACAOM accredited or candidate program. According to the Examination Statistics on the CAB website there were 598 candidates who took the CALE In 2015. It appears that currently roughly 50% of the CALE candidates for licensure also applied for the NCCAOM examinations too, a 10% increase as compared to 2012. This demonstrates that there is a significant interest in graduates from CA accredited/candidate programs desiring to take the NCCAOM examinations and become certified.

**(Please note: Applicants for licensure may have to complete additional requirements in some states in addition to achieving NCCAOM certification or passing NCCAOM examinations. Applicants for licensure are advised to check with the state agency that regulates acupuncture in the state in which they wish to practice to ensure that they have met all state designated requirements. For more information, please visit the [NCCAOM website](#) for a listing of state exam requirements and state regulatory contact information.)* State regulatory boards requiring a state specific licensing exam in addition to using the NCCAOM national exams are:

- **Texas** – State Jurisprudence Exam
- **Nevada** – State Practical Exam
- **New Mexico** - State Jurisprudence or Legal Exam
- **New Jersey** – Acupuncture Safety and Jurisprudence Exam
- **Idaho** – Blood Borne Pathogen course and comprehensive examination that incorporates clean needle techniques and OSHA procedures and requirements

Q. (8). Has the NCCAOM national examination system ever been legally challenged?



A. (8) No. No legal action has ever been brought against the NCCAOM examinations. The NCCAOM has developed a very fair and legally defensible examination program that tests for competency of entry-level skills and knowledge. States can rely on the NCCAOM for legal defensibility of the exams. The assurance of longstanding defensibility is one of the multiple reasons why 98% of the states in the U.S. that regulate acupuncturists use the NCCAOM exams as a prerequisite for licensure. All NCCAOM certification programs are accredited by the [Institute for Credentialing Excellence's \(ICE\) National Commission for Certifying Agencies \(NCCA\)](#). The NCCAOM examination development and certification processes for each of its certification programs have met all the essential elements of a nationally accredited certification program.

Q. (9). What about candidates who wish to take the exams in another language?

A. (9) The NCCAOM certification examinations are available in three languages: English, Chinese, and Korean. There have been no challenges to the translation of the NCCAOM foreign language examinations. The NCCAOM takes great pride in the proper translation of its examinations. All examination questions used for foreign language examinations are first translated from English to Chinese or Korean by an independent third-party-accredited translation company. Next, the NCCAOM Translation Exam Development Committee, consisting of subject-matter experts (SMEs) who have as their primary first-language Chinese or Korean, provide quality control checks (i.e., back translation of each exam question). Finally, once the foreign language exams are administered, and before they are scored, the NCCAOM psychometrician conducts a fit-analysis for each item to assure that each exam item is functioning like the English version; otherwise it will not be used for scoring the exam. Although the number of candidates registering to take the NCCAOM exams in Chinese and Korean has significantly diminished in the last few years, the NCCAOM always has the capacity to administer foreign language examinations any time there is sufficient demand. *(Please note: The NCCAOM foreign language exams are administered as paper linear exams, not computer adaptive tests.)*

Q. (10). How does the NCCAOM work with state regulatory agencies, and how could they work with California Acupuncture Board?



A. (11). NCCAOM partners with state regulatory boards to ensure that each practitioner has met entry-level competency standards to practice acupuncture and Oriental medicine safely. The NCCAOM's main role with state agencies is to administer a psychometrically defensible, valid and reliable assessment tool that effectively measures the knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) required to safely and effectively practice AOM.

Each state regulatory body remains responsible for setting and enforcing its own state licensure standards. **The California Acupuncture Board would continue to set the standards (including educational and competency requirements) for licensure of California acupuncturists.** The State could still authorize separate, state-specific exams for content not covered on the national entry-level certification exams, such as a CA laws or jurisprudence examination.

State AOM regulatory boards rely on ACAOM and NCCAOM to help protect their consumers from the unsafe practice of AOM by unqualified practitioners. Each of the 44 states plus the District of Columbia that utilize the [NCCAOM examinations](#) recognize the financial and administrative benefits of requiring NCCAOM certification or passing of the NCCAOM examinations as a prerequisite for licensure of acupuncturists. All examination development and administration costs, as well as legal defensibility, are assumed by the NCCAOM.

Q. (11). How can a national examination system such as the NCCAOM satisfy the variety of practice acts and scopes of practice for each state that regulates AOM?

A. (11). NCCAOM's modular examination system allows each state to adopt the exams that are tailored to its AOM practice act requirements, statutes, rules, and regulations. NCCAOM offers four exams for the AOM profession: Foundations of Oriental Medicine, Acupuncture with Point Location, Chinese Herbology, and Biomedicine. State regulatory agencies require either all or a portion of these examinations, depending on their practice act and whether their state regulates the practice of Chinese herbal medicine. Candidates that successfully pass each of the required exams have demonstrated competency in each of the core areas of AOM. The candidates are responsible for completing any additional licensing requirements of their state.



The NCCAOM also has the capacity to create and administer new or modified examinations to meet the unique requirements of a state regulatory board.

Q. (12). How do we know that every candidate who sits for the NCCAOM exams is qualified to take the exams?

A. (12). NCCAOM has developed an in-depth process to verify each applicant's education and training to make sure that each candidate has met ACAOM's academic standards and professional competencies as set forth by [the ACAOM Accreditation Manual](#) as well as other requirements such as the Council of Colleges for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine's [\(CCAOM\) Clean Needle Technique \(CNT\) course](#), if applicable for the particular certification program. The eligibility qualification process includes a thorough verification of educational transcripts for domestic and foreign-educated applicants. All candidates must meet the same nationally set requirements in order to become eligible to sit for the NCCAOM exams. **Note: The CAB could set a higher standard for eligibility if it chooses.**

Q. (12). Why is the NCCAOM exam more costly than the CALE?

A. (12). The NCCAOM administers a modular examination format, in which *four* exams (Foundations of Oriental Medicine, Acupuncture with Point Location, Chinese Herbology, and Biomedicine), *each* containing 100 items (for a total of 400 items), must be passed in order to achieve certification in Oriental Medicine. This format ensures that the candidate has passed each of the required content areas for Oriental Medicine. Computer based administration allows the NCCAOM to administer its exams year-round. Candidates can schedule the exams any time after they are deemed eligible, at any of more than 200 Pearson VUE secure test centers throughout the world (see question 2 for additional details about NCCAOM exam administration). Candidates who fail an exam can retest any time after a 45-day waiting period.

The NCCAOM is continually updating and improving examination content by partnering with experienced subject matter experts (SMEs), exam administration and psychometric vendors, and knowledgeable staff. Six to eight SMEs serve as item writers and reviewers for each NCCAOM exam. Each SME is trained and then serves as a guest on an Exam Development Committee (EDC), and must demonstrate competency in examination item writing and



reviewing before he or she can become an EDC member. The NCCAOM makes a major investment in training competent item writers and reviewers. Many of the proceeds from NCCAOM examination fees go toward examination development to ensure that each examination is a valid and reliable measure of competency.

Another cost factor is the growth and maintenance of sizable item “banks”. Computer adaptive testing necessitates having a “bank” of many hundreds of items for each exam module. Every item that is used for scoring is psychometrically calculated for reliability.

All policies and procedures for the NCCAOM certification programs must be reviewed a minimum of every five years so that these programs can be reaccredited by the NCCA. See the [NCCAOM® Examination Study Guides](#) for detailed information on development and administration of the NCCAOM exams.

Updated March 2016