

Pass Rates on Licensure Exams



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Highlights of Licensure Exam Pass Rates for First-time UNC Test Takers

- Graduates from seven of UNC's nine **nursing programs** passed the national nursing licensure examination at a rate *at least equal to the national average (84.9%)*.
- Students from 12 of 15 UNC institutions with **teacher education programs** passed the Professional Knowledge Teaching licensure examination *at or above the national average pass rate (89.2%)*.
- Graduates of one of UNC's two **law schools** passed the Bar exam at a rate *above the national average (74.9%)*.
- Students with an advanced degree from three of the six UNC institutions that offer **graduate programs in accounting** passed *all parts* of the CPA examination at a rate *at least equal to the national average (28.6%)*. Students from four of the institutions passed *some or all parts* of the exam at a rate *at least equal to the national average (62.2%)*.
- On average, and in **all professional areas except accounting**, UNC graduates taken together passed licensure exams at rates *at or above the national average*.

First-time Test Takers' Pass Rates on Licensure Exams in Nursing, Professional Knowledge (Teaching), Law, and Public Accounting (most recent year available)

Institution	Nursing ¹ (1999)			Professional ² Knowledge (1997-98)			Law ³ (1998-99)			Public Accounting (1998)					
	Number of Test Takers	% Passing Exam	% of Nat'l Pass Rate	Number of Test Takers	% Passing Exam	% of Nat'l Pass Rate	Number of Test Takers	% Passing Exam	% of Nat'l Pass Rate	With Advanced Degree-- all subjects			With Adv. Deg.-- some or all subjects		
										Number of Test Takers	% Passing Exam--all subjects	% of Nat'l Pass Rate	Number of Test Takers	% Passing Exam-- some or all subjects	% of Nat'l Pass Rate
ASU				335	95.2%	106.8%				15	53.3%	186.4%	15	80.0%	128.6%
ECU	127	92.9%	109.4%	283	92.9%	104.2%				29	17.2%	60.1%	29	62.1%	99.8%
ECSU				43	93.0%	104.3%									
FSU				65	75.4%	84.5%									
NCA&TSU	53	83.0%	97.8%	51	82.4%	92.3%									
NCCU	47	66.0%	77.7%	53	86.8%	97.3%	87	52.9%	70.6%						
NCSA															
NCSU				81	97.5%	109.3%				47	51.1%	178.7%	47	87.2%	140.2%
UNCA				49	98.0%	109.8%									
UNC-CH	123	89.4%	105.3%	52	100.0%	112.1%	146	87.7%	117.1%	67	16.4%	57.3%	67	65.7%	105.6%
UNCC	77	92.2%	108.6%	200	96.5%	108.2%									
UNCG	95	89.5%	105.4%	167	97.6%	109.4%				14	28.6%	100.0%	14	50.0%	80.4%
UNCP				73	91.8%	102.9%									
UNCW	45	84.4%	99.4%	229	97.8%	109.7%				22	9.1%	31.5%	22	36.4%	58.5%
WCU	39	94.9%	111.8%	103	95.1%	106.7%									
WSSU	60	91.7%	108.0%	24	91.7%	102.8%									
UNC ALL	666	88.4%	104.1%	1,808	94.3%	105.7%	233	74.7%	99.7%	194	27.8%	97.2%	194	67.0%	107.7%
National	28,107	84.9%	100.0%	138,146	89.2%	100.0%	53,559	74.9%	100.0%	5,212	28.6%	100.0%	5,212	62.2%	100.0%

1. National data provided by the National Council of State Boards of Nursing, Inc.: 1999 Licensure and Examination Statistics.

2. National norm data provided by Educational Testing Service and Examination Statistics; includes test takers October 1, 1996 through July 31, 1999.

3. Data compiled and presented by the National Conference of Bar Examiners: *The Bar Examiner*, vol. 69, no. 2, May 1999.

4. Data compiled by the National Association of State Boards of Accountancy (NASBA): *Candidate Performance on the Uniform CPA Examination*, 1999 edition. Includes test takers for May and November 1998.

Review of National Licensure Examination Development, Administration, and UNC System-wide Pass Rates

This report presents data on the UNC system-wide pass rates on the licensure examinations for Nursing, Professional Knowledge in Teaching, Law, and Public Accounting. All pass rates are reported for first-time test takers only. Institutional pass rates in all areas *except law* include the scores of graduates who take the test in another state, providing the graduates identify their preparatory institution on the registration form. Pass rates for law schools exclude the scores of graduates who take the test out of state.

This report differs from annual reports on licensure pass rates in individual professional areas in that it compares each institution's pass rate with the national average pass rate. The comparison is shown in the shaded column of each table, and is expressed as a percentage of the national average pass rate. Thus, a value of 105.0 in this column would indicate that an institution's pass rate is 5.0 percent above the national average.

Nursing Licensure Examination

Data presented in Table 1 show that the UNC system-wide pass rate (88.4%) for the National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX) was slightly above (104.2% of) the national average (84.9%).

A candidate must pass the NCLEX in order to be licensed as a Registered Nurse. The process requires candidates to register with the Chauncey Group (the National Council's contracted testing service), and after they have received eligibility status from the board of nursing they may schedule and take the exam at a Sylvan Technology Center.

The test is a computerized adaptive test (CAT) in which the score is based on the difficulty of questions answered correctly rather than the number of questions answered correctly. This is a fundamentally different approach from the traditional paper-and-pencil test where all candidates receive the same questions. In the CAT approach examinations are individualized.

Institution	Number of Test Takers	% Passing Exam	% of Nat'l Pass Rate
ASU			
ECU	127	92.9%	109.4%
ECSU			
FSU			
NCA&TSU	53	83.0%	97.8%
NCCU	47	66.0%	77.7%
NCSA			
NCSU			
UNCA			
UNC-CH	123	89.4%	105.3%
UNCC	77	92.2%	108.6%
UNCG	95	89.5%	105.4%
UNCP			
UNCW	45	84.4%	99.4%
WCU	39	94.9%	111.8%
WSSU	60	91.7%	108.0%
UNC ALL	666	88.4%	104.1%
National	28,107	84.9%	100.0%

Table 1. Nursing: First-time Test Takers' Pass Rates (1999)¹

¹ National data provided by the National Council of State Boards of Nursing, Inc.: *1999 Licensure and Examination Statistics*.

The difficulty level of the 3000 questions in the NCLEX item pool has been statistically analyzed. The computer-generated items begin with relatively easy questions and become progressively harder until the candidate begins missing questions. Then the cycle begins again with easier questions and this “zig zagging” approach continues until the candidate reaches the 50 percent point. That is, that point where the candidate consistently answers one question correctly and one question incorrectly.

After the candidate has answered the minimum number of questions (N=75), a comparison is made between the candidate’s competence level and the passing standard. If the competence is calculated to be clearly above the passing standard, the candidate passes and the examination ends. Similarly, if the candidate is clearly below the passing standard, the candidate fails and the examination ends. However, if the competence level is close enough to the passing standard that it is unclear whether the candidate should pass or not, the candidate continues to answer questions. Clearly passing or failing is defined as when the “gray zone” around a candidate’s competence level falls entirely above or below the passing standard. The gray zone is the region within which the measurement of individual competence might vary. The gray zone shrinks marginally after each question because individual competence is based on more information. However, if after a candidate answers the maximum number of questions (N=265), it continues to be impossible to ascertain whether the individual clearly passed or failed, the gray-zone methodology is disregarded. The final competence level would then be based on every question answered and if 64% were answered correctly the candidate passes; otherwise the candidate fails the examination.

Professional Knowledge Examination for Teachers

To receive an initial license to teach in a North Carolina public school, candidates must pass a test of pedagogy and content. Because the test of content varies with the specialty area and grade level (elementary, middle, secondary, all levels), there are more than 140 individual content-area-based tests. All candidates must complete a test of pedagogical skill (i.e., professional knowledge). The results summarized in this year’s report on pass rates (Table 2) are based on UNC students who took this single test of pedagogical skill within a fixed number months of successfully completing their student teaching course during the 1997-98 year—i.e., during the “authorized period².” Content scores are not considered, because the number of students taking each test at each constituent institution in any given year is generally too small to provide a meaningful or representative pass rate.

In 1997-98, there were two tests of pedagogical skill that candidates for licensure could take: the National Teacher Exam (NTE) on Professional Knowledge; or the PRAXIS Principles of Teaching and Learning (PLT) exam. Approximately 90 percent of candidates that year chose to take the NTE Professional Knowledge Test while the remaining 10 percent took the newer PRAXIS PLT exam. The results in the attached table are based only on the performance of the 90 percent who took the NTE Professional Knowledge Exam. For 1998-99, when candidates for licensure were required to take the PRAXIS PLT exam to demonstrate an acceptable level of pedagogical skill, the results will be based on their

² Authorized period: fall 1997 completion of student teaching: March 1997 through November 1998; spring 1998 completion of student teaching: June 1997 through April 1999; summer 1998 completion of student teaching: January 1998 through June 1999.

performance on that exam. (Pass rates for 1998-99 will not be available until the fall 2000 semester.)

**Table 2. Professional Knowledge (Teaching):
First-time Test Takers' Pass Rates (1997-98)³**

The benchmark national pass rate was derived from the unpublished distribution of NTE Professional Knowledge test scores. The distribution included all scores from a three-year test period—1996-1999—and did not differentiate between first-time and repeat test takers. The national average pass rate was calculated as the percentage of test takers that obtained a score at least as high as the cut score used in North Carolina to set its pass rate.

It is not clear whether the combination of scores from first-time and repeat test takers introduces a bias into the calculated national average pass rate. To the extent that repeat takers are better prepared to pass the test the second or third time around, the national benchmark would be biased high. To the extent that repeat takers are marginal candidates who have demonstrated a greater likelihood of failing the licensure exam in the past, and are thus more likely to fail it in future sittings, the national benchmark rate will be biased low. We believe that these alternative effects are counterbalancing and that the calculated national benchmark is sufficiently unbiased to be valid, but the critical reader should take account of this potential flaw in the benchmark. Evidence to support the assumption of “no bias” is the fact that national data on CPA pass rates show that repeat takers have pass rates that are about the same as those of first-time takers.

Institution	Number of Test Takers	% Passing Exam	% of Nat'l Pass Rate
ASU	335	95.2%	106.8%
ECU	283	92.9%	104.2%
ECSU	43	93.0%	104.3%
FSU	65	75.4%	84.5%
NCA&TSU	51	82.4%	92.3%
NCCU	53	86.8%	97.3%
NCSA			
NCSU	81	97.5%	109.3%
UNCA	49	98.0%	109.8%
UNC-CH	52	100.0%	112.1%
UNCC	200	96.5%	108.2%
UNCG	167	97.6%	109.4%
UNCP	73	91.8%	102.9%
UNCW	229	97.8%	109.7%
WCU	103	95.1%	106.7%
WSSU	24	91.7%	102.8%
UNC ALL	1,808	94.3%	105.7%
National	138,146	89.2%	100.0%

Bar Examination

Data presented in Table 3 indicate that system-wide the UNC percentage pass rate on the Bar Examination (74.7%) was at the national average of 74.9 percent.

The North Carolina Bar exam is given each year in the last weeks of February and July. It consists of a Multistate Bar Exam (MBE), a multiple-choice exam prepared by the National Conference of Bar Examiners and reviewed by the Board of Law Examiners, and an essay exam that is prepared and graded by the North Carolina Board of Law Examiners is

³ National norm data provided by *Educational Testing Service and Examination Statistics*; includes test takers October 1, 1996 through July 31, 1999.

administered. The MBE score counts 40 percent, and the essay exam 60 percent, of a candidate's total score.

Table 3. Law: First-time Test Takers' Pass Rates (1998-99)⁴

The nationally standardized MBE is given in all but three states—Washington, Indiana (adoption effective in 2001), and Louisiana. It is a 200-item multiple-choice examination covering Constitutional Law, Contracts, Criminal Law, Evidence, Real Property, and Torts. Both raw and scaled scores are computed for each applicant. Raw scores on different forms of the test are scaled to ensure that grades are comparable across administrations of the examination.

Because the essay portion of the exam, and the weight assigned to it, are unique to the state, the passing score on the full Bar exam varies by state. In North Carolina, the essay exam consists of 12 questions worth 10 points each, and each question is graded by a single member of the board who looks for issue recognition and legal analysis. A model answer is prepared by the full Board of Examiners and once the answer is found the grader stops reading. The grade is not based on writing style, grammar, or organization, but rather on the presence of sound legal analysis and issue recognition.

Institution	Number of Test Takers	% Passing Exam	% of Nat'l Pass Rate
ASU			
ECU			
ECSU			
FSU			
NCA&TSU			
NCCU	87	52.9%	70.6%
NCSA			
NCSU			
UNCA			
UNC-CH	146	87.7%	117.1%
UNCC			
UNCG			
UNCP			
UNCW			
WCU			
WSSU			
UNC ALL	233	74.7%	99.7%
National	53,559	74.9%	100.0%

CPA Examination

The path to licensure in public accounting is likely to be more indirect than the path to licensure in teaching, nursing, or law. This is because most accounting programs do not just focus on training CPAs. Instead they offer training in management accounting, corporate accounting, internal auditing, non-profit and government accounting, and related fields. In addition, CPA candidates are required either to complete *five* years of field work in accounting or to work *two* years in public accounting under a licensed CPA before they can be certified. (On January 1, 2001 each alternative will be reduced by one year, to *four* and *one*, respectively.) In addition, a number of CPA candidates take degrees in business administration and even law, rather than accounting. There is no screening of candidates to determine which ones have completed appropriate training for the exam. For these and other reasons, relatively few graduates in accounting pursue public accounting, and because

⁴ Data compiled and presented by the National Conference of Bar Examiners: *The Bar Examiner*, vol. 69, no. 2, May 1999.

training in accounting varies widely among test takers, pass rates on the exam tend to be low.

One step taken by many states to improve pass rates and the general competence of newly licensed CPAs is to require that candidates for the CPA complete at least 150 semester credit hours, at least 30 of which must be taken in accounting, before they can be licensed. North Carolina will implement this requirement in 2001. Given the move nationally and within North Carolina to this new standard, the passing scores reported in this section are limited to students who have either completed an advanced degree or have completed the 150 hours by the time they sit for the CPA exam. By focusing the analysis of pass rates on this group, there is a greater likelihood that pass rates will reflect the performance of students who have completed a minimally cohesive CPA training program. Nevertheless, there will be some exceptions. For example, the Master of Accountancy (MAC) program at UNC-Chapel Hill admits only non-accounting baccalaureates and focuses on areas of accounting other than public accounting.

The data displayed in Table 4 show the success rates of all UNC first-time CPA candidates who have earned an advanced degree (or have completed at least 150 semester hours of college courses) at the time they first sat for the exam. Because few candidates pass all subjects on their first attempt, a table showing the pass rates for *some or all* subjects has been added (Table 5). The data in Table 4 show that UNC students in three of the six graduate programs passed *all* subjects at a rate at least equal to the national average (28.6%), while the data in Table 5 show that students in four of the programs passed *some or all* of the subjects at or above the national average pass rate (62.2%).

Table 4. Public Accounting: First-time Test Takers with Advanced Degree's Pass Rates on All Subjects (1998)⁵

Institution	Number of Test Takers	% Passing Exam--all subjects	% of Nat'l Pass Rate
ASU	15	53.3%	186.4%
ECU	29	17.2%	60.1%
ECSU			
FSU			
NCA&TSU			
NCCU			
NCSA			
NCSU	47	51.1%	178.7%
UNCA			
UNC-CH	67	16.4%	57.3%
UNCC			
UNCG	14	28.6%	100.0%
UNCP			
UNCW	22	9.1%	31.5%
WCU			
WSSU			
UNC ALL	194	27.8%	97.2%
National	5,212	28.6%	100.0%

The National Association of State Boards of Accountancy (NASBA), which compiled these data, has gathered data on CPA candidates since 1982 and began publishing the results in 1985. The report is prepared through voluntary participation of individual boards of accountancy and the cooperation of the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA), which prepares and grades the Uniform CPA Examination.

⁵ Data compiled by the National Association of State Boards of Accountancy (NASBA): *Candidate Performance on the Uniform CPA Examination*, 1999 edition. Includes test takers for May and November 1998.

Table 5. Public Accounting: First-time Test Takers without Advanced Degree's Pass Rates on Some or All Subjects (1998)

The national examination consists of standardized questions relating to four subject areas: Auditing, Business Law and Professional Responsibilities, Financial Accounting and Reporting-Business Enterprise, and Accounting and Reporting-Other Areas. Each area must be passed with a score of 75 or higher in order for a candidate to pass the CPA exam. It should be noted, however, that a score of 75 does not assure the candidate of earning credit for a particular examination subject. This is due to “conditioning requirements,” which vary among jurisdictions (states and territories) and make granting credit dependent upon passing and achieving a minimum score on any subjects that were failed. The most typical conditioning requirements—and those adopted by North Carolina—require a score of 75 percent on at least two of the subject areas *and* a score of at least 50 percent on all subject areas not passed, in order to receive credit for subject areas passed. Because the conditioning requirements affect only the calculation of the percentage passing *some*, but not *all*, subjects, it does not affect the calculation of the national pass rate used in Table 4, but it could affect the national rate used in Table 5.

Institution	Number of Test Takers	% Passing Exam--some or all subjects	% of Nat'l Pass Rate
ASU	15	80.0%	128.6%
ECU	29	62.1%	99.8%
ECSU			
FSU			
NCA&TSU			
NCCU			
NCSA			
NCSU	47	87.2%	140.2%
UNCA			
UNC-CH	67	65.7%	105.6%
UNCC			
UNCG	14	50.0%	80.4%
UNCP			
UNCW	22	36.4%	58.5%
WCU			
WSSU			
UNC ALL	194	67.0%	107.7%
National	5,212	62.2%	100.0%

Most jurisdictions, including North Carolina, also require that first-time candidates take all four subjects and that repeat candidates take all remaining unpassed subjects. However, five jurisdictions (California, New Mexico, New York, Pennsylvania, and the Virgin Islands) permit their first-time candidates to take fewer than all of the subjects for which they are eligible, a practice that produces a pass rate that could be biased. This is because the pass rate published by the AICPA is the percentage of test takers who pass all the subjects *taken*, not necessarily all four subjects. In preparing this report, an adjusted pass rate was calculated for all jurisdictions except California, New York, and Pennsylvania (New Mexico and the Virgin Islands have too few test takers to matter), and it was identical to the published rate. Therefore, the published rate was used in the comparison with individual institutions.

While an institution's CPA pass rate is a useful criterion for evaluating program effectiveness, it must be considered within the context of its program focus. For example, given the non-CPA focus of the program at UNC-Chapel Hill, its pass rate is low, yet it has had *seven* “Top Successful Candidates” since 1995 (that designation is for candidates having one of the top three scores in the State). Several other UNC institutions have programs similar to the one at UNC-Chapel Hill.

Summary

Table 6 combines the previous tables in one for a comprehensive view of the pass rates on licensure exams. The data show that:

- Graduates from seven of UNC's nine **nursing programs** passed the national nursing licensure examination at a rate *at least equal to the national average (84.9%)*.
- Students from 12 of 15 UNC institutions with **teacher education programs** passed the Professional Knowledge Teaching licensure examination *at or above the national average pass rate (89.2%)*.
- Graduates of one of UNC's two **law schools** passed the Bar exam at a rate *above the national average (74.9%)*.
- Students with an advanced degree from three of the six UNC institutions that offer **graduate programs in accounting** passed *all parts* of the CPA examination at a rate *at least equal to the national average (28.6%)*. Students from four of the institutions passed *some or all parts* of the exam at a rate *at least equal to the national average (62.2%)*.
- On average, and in **all professional areas except accounting**, UNC graduates taken together passed licensure exams at rates *at or above the national average*.

Table 6. Comprehensive View of First-time Test Takers' Pass Rates on Licensure Exams⁶

Institution	Nursing ¹ (1999)			Professional ² Knowledge (1997-98)			Law ³ (1998-99)			Public Accounting ⁴ (1998)					
	Number of Test Takers	% Passing Exam	% of Nat'l Pass Rate	Number of Test Takers	% Passing Exam	% of Nat'l Pass Rate	Number of Test Takers	% Passing Exam	% of Nat'l Pass Rate	With Advanced Degree-- all subjects			With Adv. Deg.-- some or all subjects		
										Number of Test Takers	% Passing Exam--all subjects	% of Nat'l Pass Rate	Number of Test Takers	% Passing Exam--some or all subjects	% of Nat'l Pass Rate
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ECU	127	92.9%	109.4%	283	92.9%	104.2%				29	17.2%	60.1%	29	62.1%	99.8%
ECSU				43	93.0%	104.3%									
FSU				65	75.4%	84.5%									
NCA&TSU	53	83.0%	97.8%	51	82.4%	92.3%									
NCCU	47	66.0%	77.7%	53	86.8%	97.3%	87	52.9%	70.6%						
NCSA															
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UNC-CH	123	89.4%	105.3%	52	100.0%	112.1%	146	87.7%	117.1%	67	16.4%	57.3%	67	65.7%	105.6%
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WSSU	60	91.7%	108.0%	24	91.7%	102.8%									
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2. National norm data provided by Educational Testing Service and Examination Statistics; includes test takers October 1, 1996 through July 31, 1999.

3. Data compiled and presented by the National Conference of Bar Examiners: *The Bar Examiner*, vol. 69, no. 2, May 1999.

4. Data compiled by the National Association of State Boards of Accountancy (NASBA): *Candidate Performance on the Uniform CPA Examination*, 1999 edition. Includes test takers for May and November 1998.

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⁶ Most recent year available, as indicated.