



## Preparing Students for High-Stakes Certification Exams With Authentic, Low-Stakes Practice

Many vocations require proof of minimum task proficiency prior to performing these tasks on the job. Proficiency is often demonstrated through the completion of industry-specific certification or licensure exams. Part of a student’s training and education in a field requiring proficiency exams should include preparation for the required high-stakes certification exam. To prepare students for satisfactory exam performance, the integration of authentic, low-stakes exam practice included within the design of the course is very helpful to students (Spohn et al., 2021). Aligned with clear feedback and excluded from course grading, students can use these practice opportunities to isolate topics where they may need to spend more time and focus in order to be successful on the certification or licensure exam.

### Scaffolded, Low-Stakes Practice With Immediate and Personalized Feedback

Research indicates that immediate and frequent performance feedback improves the efficiency of skill mastery (Brown, 2014). Therefore, low-stakes certification exam practice should be administered early in a degree program, as well as throughout the program, moving from simple to difficult tasks, and returned to the student with detailed feedback on their performance. This practice will help prepare students for successful certification exam completion as well as augmenting graded work related to the associated course.

### Seven Steps to Develop a Low-Stakes Practice Certification Exam

These seven steps will provide direction on creating certification exam practice aligned to course learning outcomes.

	What you should do	How you should do it
<b>Step 1</b>	Determine which certification exam(s) are associated with the curriculum or course. Obtain access to the body of knowledge and outline of the exam criterion.	Agencies offering specialized certifications provide a very general outline of topics candidates must know in order to pass the exam. These are often located on the agency’s website.
<b>Step 2</b>	Examine your course’s intended learning outcomes and unit learning objectives to ensure that the course is addressing the information expected to be on the certification exam.	Using the exam body of knowledge, align the certification exam topics to your course and unit objectives, content, and assessments. For exam topics not in your course, determine if inclusion is needed or if the topic may be covered by another course in your curriculum.
<b>Step 3</b>	Determine the frequency of practice opportunities for the certification exam.	Should the exam be deployed to students more than once, on a scaffolded basis, or only at the end of the program?
<b>Step 4</b>	Create the practice certification exam.	The practice exam should mimic the real certification exam. This includes the number of questions, testing environment, and timing. Question structure should be identical (e.g., multiple choice), and questions should be rigorous.
<b>Step 5</b>	Deploy the practice certification exam.	Schedule the practice certification exam the same way the real exam will be scheduled. Simulation of the registration experience is beneficial.



<b>Step 6</b>	Assess and evaluate student performance.	Grading should be immediate through the learning management system (LMS), if possible. Students should know their score upon exam submission. After completion, review the exam data to determine which questions were missed and track the frequency of questions missed (use the LMS to gather this data, if possible).
<b>Step 7</b>	Provide aligned supporting resources your students can use to refine areas of weaker performance.	After the analysis of missed questions, provide students with resource materials aligned to topics of missed questions.

### Sources

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Spohn, R., Schweinle, W., III, Berg-Poppe, P., South-Winter, C., & DeJong, D. (2021). Factors for successfully passing certification exams: A systematic review. *Perspectives in Health Information Management*, 18(4).