



NATIONAL BOARD FOR
CERTIFIED COUNSELORS®
AND AFFILIATES

Work Analysis for Professional Counseling

National Board for Certified Counselors

White Paper

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Purpose of the Work Analysis

The National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC) conducted a comprehensive work analysis validation survey to identify the knowledge, skills, and professional judgments required for entry-level Counselors. One goal that this process achieves is to help ensure that the National Counselor Examination (NCE) and the National Clinical Mental Health Counseling Examination (NCMHCE) accurately reflect current Counseling practice.

NBCC regularly evaluates the Counseling profession to ensure that its certification examinations remain aligned with best practices in the profession. Because these examinations are designed to protect the public, they must be based on up-to-date professional standards and real-world practice. The work analysis serves as the foundation of NBCC's examination development cycle (see Figure 1), providing evidence that the examination content areas and their assigned weights appropriately reflect the competencies needed for safe and effective Counseling practice.

Figure 1: NBCC Examination Development Cycle



Work Analysis Procedures

The work analysis validation survey was designed to capture the full scope of modern Counseling practice and identify the most important responsibilities of entry-level Counselors. NBCC used a structured, step-by-step research design that combined qualitative and quantitative methods. This approach ensured that the updated content framework reflected both expert professional judgment and broad input from Counselors across different practice settings. Throughout all phases of the work analysis, a Work Analysis Task Force (WATF) composed of subject matter experts (SMEs) provided oversight and professional judgment, including task refinement, domain structuring, interpretation of analytic results, and final validation of the proposed content outline and blueprint decisions.

Phase 1: Data Collection – Interviews

The first phase focused on gathering detailed feedback through interviews. NBCC conducted structured interviews with leaders of national Counseling organizations to better understand current expectations for Counselors, emerging trends in the profession, and anticipated changes in practice. These interviews also helped place the examination content within the larger context of the Counseling profession. Organizations represented in this phase included:

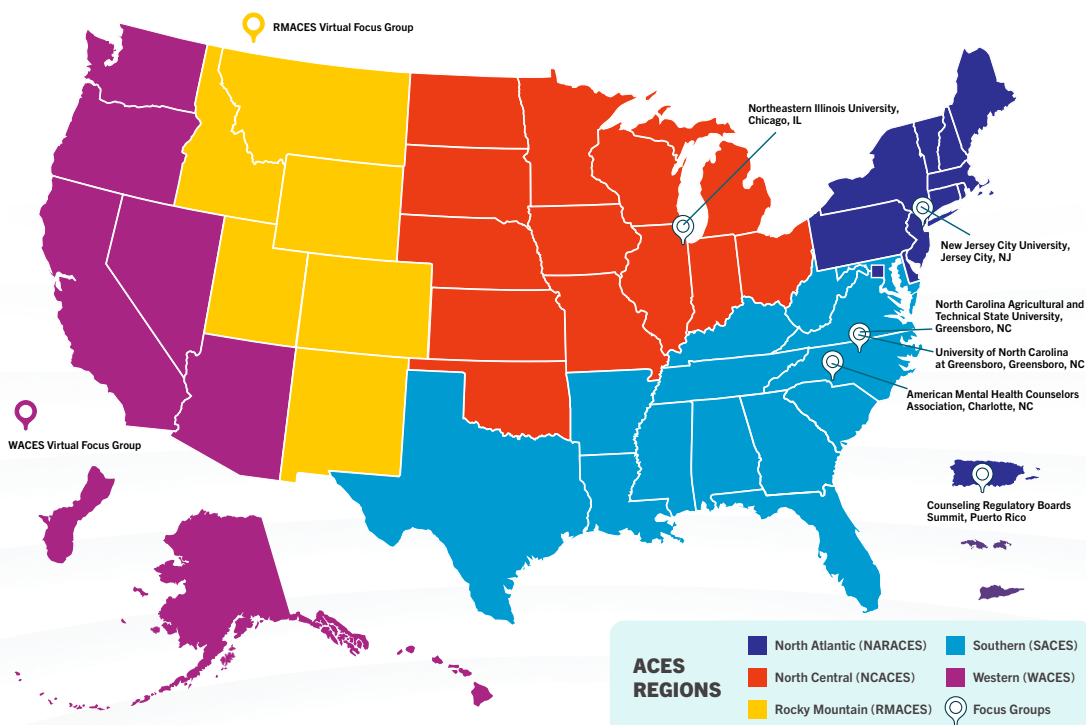
- American Association of State Counseling Boards
- American Counseling Association
- American Mental Health Counselors Association
- Association for Counselor Education and Supervision
- Chi Sigma Iota: Counseling Academic and Professional Honor Society International
- Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs



Phase 2: Data Collection – Focus Groups

In addition to the leadership interviews, NBCC conducted eight focus groups with over 100 practicing Counselors and Counselor Educators from across the United States.

Figure 2: ACES Regions



These discussions were designed to gather detailed descriptions of daily work activities, professional decision-making, and the real-world challenges Counselors encounter in practice. Participants also discussed how Counseling practice has evolved since the previous work analysis, including changes in service delivery, increased use of technology and telemental health, and the lasting impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the profession.

Picture 1: Focus Group at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University



Phase 3: Data Collection – Validation Survey

The Work Analysis Task Force (WATF) reviewed and synthesized the information gathered from the interviews and focus groups to develop the Work Analysis Validation Survey for Professional Counselors. This survey was designed to confirm which responsibilities, knowledge areas, and skills are most important for entry-level Counseling practice. The final survey included 16 modules with 460 individual items. These modules covered 106 Counselor work tasks, 55 areas of clinical focus, 99 areas of knowledge, 50 clinical skills, 73 judgments, and 47 tools/assessments. Thirty background items collected information about Counselor demographics, client populations, and overall feedback about the survey. To enhance engagement, the survey incorporated gamified elements (see Figure 3) that made the experience more interactive for respondents.



Figure 3: Gamified Survey Example

The survey was released in July 2025 and remained open through September 2025. Over 14,000 counselors participated in the survey. 8,615 completed the survey, and 7,483 responses were deemed viable for analysis. In September 2025, the WATF held a comprehensive meeting to review the survey results and identify needed updates to the NCE and NCMHCE. The goal was to ensure that both examinations continue to reflect current Counseling practice and support public protection.

Data Analyses

The work analysis produced several consistent findings that directly informed examination content decisions.

First, entry-level Counseling practice was operationalized as 101 work tasks found in six domains (see Table 1). These domains represent the essential tasks; clinical judgments; and knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) required for safe and effective practice. How these domains will be represented in the new versions of the NCE and NCMHCE is delineated in the right column of Table 1.



Table 1 – Examination Domains

Domain	Percent of Items
Professional Development & Counselor Self-Awareness	15%
Intake & Assessment	18%
Treatment Planning & Continuity of Care	15%
Delivery of Counseling Interventions	20%
Indirect Client Care	12%
Legal & Ethical Compliance	20%

Second, task importance was evaluated using both frequency and criticality. This combined approach ensured that the examinations reflect not only tasks Counselors perform often, but also tasks that carry high risk if performed incorrectly. For example, *maintain appropriate boundaries* was rated as both high in frequency and criticality, whereas *develop counseling-related publications* was rated low in both frequency and criticality.

Third, survey results yielded consistent representation of work tasks across respondent groups, including geographic region, years of experience, and professional role (Table 2). This stability supports the broad applicability of findings across the Counseling profession.



Table 2 – Respondent Subgroups

Domain	Entry	Exp	NARACES	NCACES	RMACES	SACES	WACES	Practicing	Educator	Student	Supervisor	Retired
D1	15%	15%	15%	15%	15%	15%	15%	15%	15%	15%	15%	14%
D2	20%	20%	20%	20%	20%	20%	20%	20%	20%	19%	20%	20%
D3	17%	17%	17%	17%	17%	17%	17%	17%	18%	17%	18%	18%
D4	18%	18%	18%	18%	18%	18%	18%	18%	18%	17%	18%	17%
D5	14%	14%	14%	14%	13%	14%	14%	14%	14%	15%	14%	15%
D6	16%	16%	16%	16%	16%	16%	16%	16%	16%	16%	16%	15%

Note: Highlighted yellow cells represent the subgroups of entry-level Counselors or experience, the blue cells represent the ACES regions, and gray cells represent different Counseling roles subgroups.

Fourth, telemental health was identified as a central part of modern Counseling practice for 85% of survey respondents. As a result, related tasks and professional judgments were clearly incorporated into the updated content outline. In addition, respondents reported increased use of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools in practice. To address this emerging trend, updates were made to the content domains to ensure the examinations remain aligned with current professional expectations and continue to support public protection. New tasks added to the content domains include:

- 2A.7: Obtain informed consent for telemental health services
- 6.9: Ensure telemental health platforms are utilized in compliance with state and federal laws

Finally, the lists of tasks and KSAs received strong support from SMEs. Eighty-four tasks were rated as highly relevant and important, confirming that the content reflects expectations for minimally qualified entry-level Counselors.

Together, these findings demonstrate strong alignment between the revised content framework and current Counseling practice.

Translation to the Content Outline and Examination Blueprint

The findings from the work analysis were translated into a revised content outline and updated examination specifications. This process relied on multiple sources of evidence, including survey data and SME professional judgment.

[New NCE Specifications](#)

[New NCMHCE Specifications](#)

Domain definitions were reviewed and refined through several rounds of discussion to improve clarity and reduce overlap. Content weights were determined using both empirical survey results and SME judgment. Survey-based importance ratings were consistent across subgroups, supporting the stability of the proposed weights.

Based on this combined evidence, the WATF recommended final domain weights that reflect both statistical findings and professional consensus.



The work analysis also informed blueprint decisions related to examination length and scoring. The new NCE will have 170 items, of which 30 are field test items, and the NCMHCE will have 130–150 items, of which 30–50 are field test items. These updates ensure that the NCE and NCMHCE continue to support reliable and valid score interpretations while accurately reflecting the structure and demands of contemporary Counseling practice.

To learn more about the indicated changes to the NCE and NCMHCE, [please visit our website](#).