

Learning. Leading. Lasting: Preliminary Results from Our Survey of Exam Takers

Academy Exams has a simple, but not easy, mission of “Learning, Leading, and Lasting”. As a part of meeting the first two parts of this goal—learning and lasting, this past winter, we began surveying our exam takers to understand if what we offer in terms of certification programming met their needs, and by extension, the needs of the industry. In the following brief report, we will discuss the construction, results, and lessons learned from this survey. We are both proud of these results, but see tremendous room for growth. Our hope is that in sharing this information that our peers in the industry can offer guidance in these next, growing steps.

History of Academy Exams

The Academy Exams is an offering of the [Academy of Fire Sprinkler Technology](#). We are located in Champaign, Illinois, USA.

In October of 2008 the Florida Fire Sprinkler Association asked the Academy of Fire Sprinkler Technology to develop and deliver an alternative certification to the NICET Program. They asked the Academy to create a certification for those that inspect, test, and maintain water-based fire protection systems. The Academy investigated the requirements to establish this alternative testing program, and in October of 2009 the Academy had determined that a testing alternative was not only possible but very much needed.

In 2010 the Academy wanted to ensure that all stakeholders were represented in the development of the Inspector test for the State of Florida. To that end the Academy held stakeholder meetings in the Orlando, Tampa, and Fort Lauderdale areas of the state. The meetings were well received and progress was made on the Inspector I qualifications, requirements, and testing subjects.

The Academy also wanted to solicit input from a broad range of industry professionals. To that end, the Academy invited the Florida Fire Sprinkler Association (FFSA), the Florida Fire Marshal and Inspectors Association (FFMIA), and the Florida Chapter of the American Fire Sprinkler Association (AFSA) to participate in a final stakeholder’s meeting before question writing began. This meeting was convened in June 2010 and included individuals representing each of these organizations. Inspector II qualifications, requirements, and testing subjects were discussed and validated by those in attendance.

Since the beginnings of a program, we have tested nearly 700 would-be designers.

The Survey Instrument

The survey was constructed using the input of Academy office personnel, given their experience responding to exam-taker concerns in-person as well as via telephone and e-mail. Since the beginnings of conducting exams, the Academy has been concerned with offering a quality product and experience. From the staff, we learned that the most pressing concerns for exam-

takers has been twofold: (a) the test is constructed in a manner that both reflects and prepares inspectors for their challenging career in the industry and (b) that the process, from registration to exam day, is as transparent and an efficient use of time.

To reflect these concerns in our survey, but also to not add a burdensome task following the exam, we constructed a qualitative, six-item survey with two items that focus on the primary concern of career readiness (using a 5-point Likert scale) and the three that focused on the customer service of the Academy (one Likert scale item and two short response items). The final item focuses on positive or negative reputation of the Academy, with exam takers being asked if they would recommend our services to their peers and superiors.

As noted above, the survey has been administered following exams events. The first administration of the survey was the January 20, 2017, testing event in Miami, FL.

The Participants

Participation in this survey was not mandatory; it was administered following exams on January 20 (Miami, FL), February 10 (Sanford, FL), April 7 (Sanford, FL), and May 12 (Tampa, FL) to only those that wanted to provide feedback. To date, there has been a response rate of 90% (66 participants), which has allowed us to have useful and accurate results as well as begin to draw some conclusions about steps forward.

It should be noted that while all of our participants are testing to receive some form of certification, they are key similarities and differences that exist within this group. As Director of Exams, Michelle Potenberg, explained in a previous edition of Inside the Academy (March 2017), our exam-takers are overwhelmingly male. Within this group, however, there is a great diversity of experiences, including those that are just cutting their teeth in the industry to those that have been on-the-job for decades.

Results

In the following sections, we display the results thus far in our survey of exam takers. Though we are pleased with the feedback to this point, we see them as a jumping off point for overall improvement.

Multiple Choice. With the first question, we wanted to know if our exams were an adequate challenge for the work that inspectors do or would be doing. As noted in Figure 1, 97% of exam takers responded that the exam was, indeed, a challenge of their industry knowledge. Here at Academy Exams, we have strived, along with our

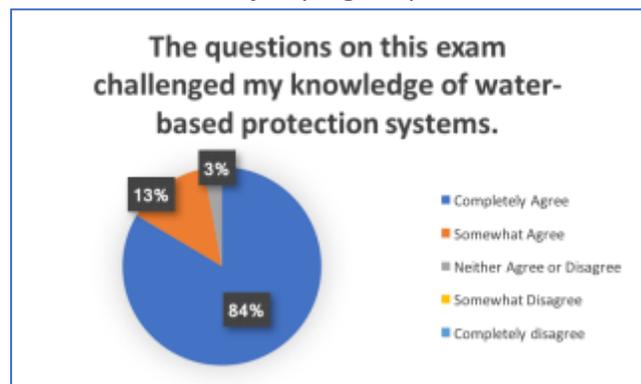


Figure 1

stakeholders, to craft a test that is meant to be an adequate threshold for entry or continued work into their field.

In line with this first question, which is inherently about the quality of the design of the exam, we wanted to know if the exam reflected the daily work that inspectors do. Unlike the previous question, this question seeks to understand if our exam has practical utility. Respondents by-in-large (85%, per Figure 2) agreed that the exam has practical usefulness. This is reflective of an exhaustive process for writing exam items that involves several industry stakeholders.

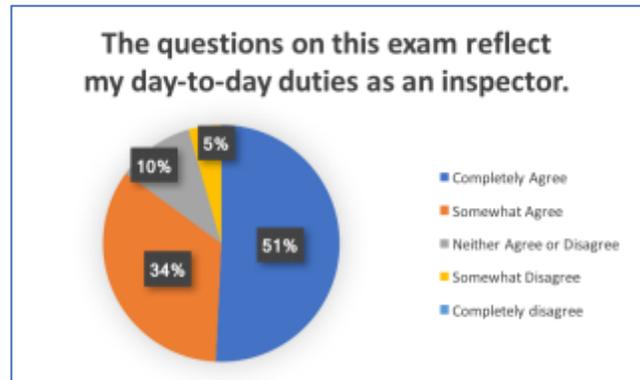


Figure 2

Our final multiple-choice question to exam takers deals with the Academy Exams' customer service. The registration process, from beginning to end, involves (a) creating a profile that includes contact information, work history, training history, prospective validators, and an authentication process; (b) registering for an exam or recertification; (c) payment for the exam or recertification; and (d) exam day authentication. At each point of the process, prospective exam takers may interact with Academy Exams, either digitally or via phone call to properly register for their desired exam or recertification. To this point, 93% of exam takers are somewhat or completely satisfied with the registration process, with the majority being completely satisfied (as reflected in Figure 3).

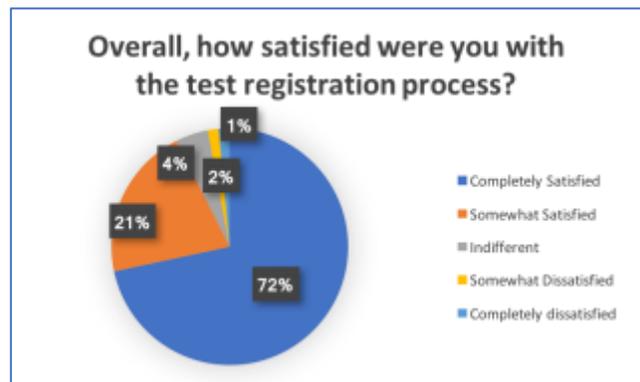


Figure 3

Sentiment Analysis. To analyze responses to our short answer survey items, we used sentiment analysis. Though this analysis is ongoing, preliminarily, we have noted that exam takers have a positive view of the Academy Exams staff including test proctors and would be, overall, willing to tell others about our exam products. Although unsolicited, some exam takers expressed a preference for both our process and product over our competitors. That said, a small number of exam takers expressed some concern over the mechanics of the test.

Takeaways Thus Far

Careful Revision. Prior to administering this survey, we were aware of the need to make sure that our exams were challenging but fair, more practical than academic, and on the cusp of industry knowledge. That said, the administration of this survey is both an additional data

source and reminder of the need to carefully consider what changes we must make to meet our goals in the examination process and product. In the upcoming months, we look forward to deepening discussion with our shareholders about our ongoing learnings from our surveys so that as we revise our exams, we do so thoughtfully.

Going Digital. As noted above, a few respondents were concerned with the administration of the exam. They wanted a digital version of the exams that gave immediate feedback. Though we are constantly considering the pros and cons of such an approach, we do so with the knowledge of who we serve. With such a diverse group of exam takers, we are weighing the comfort of written responses versus the immediacy of going digital. This is a discussion that is reflective of many practices of the industry writ-large. The question of disruption for the sake of being modern versus that doing what works and has been tested over the course of time and practice. Much like the process of revising our test, we plan to tackle this question both through engagement with our stakeholders, but also with a great deal of thought and care for the exam taker.

Continued Learning, Continued Improvement. Taken in sum, we are pleased with the results of the survey. Yet, we recognize the need for data-driven improvement to our systems. As we continue to collect more data from our exam takers as well as other stakeholders, we will tailor ourselves better to the industry that we serve. As we approach the administration of 1000th exam and engage with our partners, we recognize that we have a trove of data to mine to make Academy Exams that much better. We are extremely excited by the challenges of both using our data well, but also of continuing to improve so that we might continue to lead.