

WHAT'S WITH THE LIST?

Those who compete in New York State civil service examinations and appointing officers who are awaiting lists of persons eligible for appointment often ask the question "What's with the list?" When only a few candidates take a short-answer test, it is difficult to understand why several weeks pass before the list is ready. The explanation is not simple, but this is it:

An examination is not a game in which the examiner succeeds as the candidate fails. Nor is it one in which the examiner seeks to outwit or humiliate the candidate. The examiner's concern is to determine objectively which candidates possess the necessary knowledge and skills to satisfactorily perform the duties of the position. Not only must the examination sort out the qualified from the unqualified but it also aims at ranking in relative order those who are qualified. This is a technical process that requires a high degree of skill. The ideal examination is one in which good recruitment and an appropriate test produce a result that meets existing and future needs.

No one likes delays. The staff of the Department of Civil Service is just as much annoyed by them, as are others. That is why many changes have been introduced to compress the time cycle involved in rating and why seeking improvements is a continuing part of our work. We must be careful, however, that in our endeavor to speed up processing, quality is not impaired. This would be a graver injustice to the candidates than having them wait longer to know how they did in the examination.

It would be a simple matter for us to give priority to certain examinations and complete rating them quickly. This is not a satisfactory solution (although we sometimes must resort to it) because it usually meets one need at the expense of others.

At any given time, the sheer volume of examination activities is staggering. Examinations are held on about 15 scheduled dates a year (usually Saturdays) at 38 State and more than 100 local test centers. In recent years, more than 600 State and more than 3,000 local written tests were conducted annually. We have tested as many as 30,000 candidates in one day.

It is our responsibility to maintain security and integrity in the examination process. This calls for fair treatment of all candidates and for controls to insure meeting these objectives. To make certain that no one candidate can benefit from unauthorized access to test materials; we enforce measures to protect those test materials at each step in the examination procedure.

After an examination is administered, all papers are returned from the testing centers to Albany for rating. When the papers arrive, they must be accounted for and checked for discrepancies. This is an important initial step in maintaining tight security and preserving the integrity of the entire examination process.

A rating key must be prepared for use in the preliminary scoring of answer sheets. The answer sheets are scanned for double answers, extraneous marks and messy erasures. If this is not done, scoring errors will occur.

In many examinations, we invite candidates to return at a later date to review the questions and the tentative key (correct) answers. The written comments and criticisms received from all candidates who choose to make this review are analyzed in depth by the examining staff. In addition, the answer sheets are rated, and candidates' responses to each question are tallied.

The responses are reviewed, along with the candidates' comments, to determine whether there is reason to suspect the correctness of any tentative key answer. This review process also helps to reveal faulty or ambiguous questions and ensures that no candidate is harmed because a poorly constructed question was used.

In accordance with recent court decisions and the federal Uniform Guidelines on Employee Selection Procedures, many types of tests are further evaluated to determine if their content is valid in reflecting a candidate's ability to carry out the duties and responsibilities of the positions for which the tests are given.

The results of this analysis are transmitted with recommendations to an appeals consultant. The consultant, in turn, reviews the record, and may request information or discuss certain questions with the examining staff. The consultant then submits a report and recommendations to an appeals committee of the Civil Service Commission. The recommendations of the committee are then considered and acted upon by the Civil Service Commission. This arduous procedure is designed to perfect the rating key that is then uniformly applied to all papers.

A frequency distribution is next prepared showing raw scores for all candidates. For example, the distribution might show that one candidate in a 90-question test had 84 correct responses, two had 81 correct responses, and so on for all candidates. This distribution form carries a great deal of data pertinent to the examination and to the positions to be filled.

The distribution form is analyzed and discussed by the responsible examiners. Where necessary, conferences are held with informed persons who can help us reach decisions about the difficulty level of the test, the quality of the competition and the kinds of persons needed to perform effectively in the positions to be filled. The passing point in the examination is then set, as is the formula to be used in converting the raw test scores to final scores. Not until final scores are computed do we initiate the procedure that reveals the identity of candidates.

Derogatory items on the applications of passed candidates must be checked out if these have not already been cleared. This may involve questions of residence, conviction records, or licenses. The claims of candidates for additional credits as veterans or disabled veterans must also be determined and, where in order, the credits added to the candidates' scores. If there are other tests to be held, such as orals, performance or physical agility, these must be administered. These other tests frequently require involved arrangements for facilities.

When the examining staff has finished its work, materials in most examinations must then be processed through computer equipment for preparation of the official list of successful candidates, notices to all candidates of the result of the examination and other related documents.

That's the answer to the perennial question: "What's with the list?"