

2008/01: Everything You Wanted To Know About The LEED AP Exam But Were Too Afraid To Ask

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So, you're thinking about taking the LEED Professional Accreditation [LEED AP] Exam to get ahead, eh? Remember the sweating palms and turning stomach of your SAT? Recall tapping your pencil nervously as questions went unanswered? Then there was the waiting with bated breath to get your score. Well, the LEED AP Exam is nothing like that. Scared you, didn't I? Yes, you will probably get nervous (pushing the "submit my answers" button was one of the scariest moments of my life), but you get your scores instantly, and you're not forced to watch other people breeze through the test and wonder what's wrong with you. But let's get on to the nitty-gritty…

Break It On Down

First off, there are actually three different LEED AP Exam Tracks: LEED for New Construction, LEED for Existing Buildings, and LEED for Commercial Interiors. I took the latter, so that's the one that I'll be speaking about.

What you will find when you enter the testing center is an itty-bitty study carrel (not for the easily claustrophobic) outfitted with a computer that will be your new best friend for the next 120 minutes. The exam is 80 questions, with a minimum score of 125 and a maximum of 200. A score of 170 will buy you the right to introduce yourself as a LEED AP at your next swanky party.

Now if you're skilled in basic math, you noticed that the questions must be weighted somehow in order for 80 questions to net you 200 points. The questions are weighted for levels of difficulty, and there are some multiple-answer questions – e.g. pick two answers of the following six possibilities – but to score points on those, you must answer the entire question correctly.

The test points are divided into four sections:

- • Knowledge of LEED Credit Intents and Requirements,
- • Coordinate Project and Team,
- • Implement LEED Process,
- • and Verify, Participate in and Perform Technical Analyses Required for LEED Credits.

Don't worry – the USGBC website goes into more detail here. On the same page, you will also find some sample questions.

Personally, I did the worst on the Coordinate Project and Team and the Verifying / Participating sections. It is my opinion, though, that someone with more industry experience would do better on these sections, as that person would know more about who does what on a project – i.e., what the mechanical engineer is responsible for, etc. Sorry that I can't be more specific on the questions, but in taking the test, participants agree not to transmit, reproduce, copy, yada yada yada, any of the questions in the test. Gotta keep it fair!

Give Some Green To Get Some Green

As you may know, the test will set you back a pretty penny. As of January 10, 2008, the test alone will cost \$300 for U.S. Green Building Council [USGBC] members and \$400 for non-members. In addition, the reference (study) guide will set you back \$150 for members and \$200 for non-members. Any employee of a USGBC member firm qualifies for the member price, so be sure to check with your firm if you are indeed gainfully employed!

You can also go further into debt by attending workshops, ordering flashcards, and buying sample exams. My husband, who took the test with me, had the New Construction [NC] Sample Exam from PPI. PPI also carries the Commercial

Interiors [CI] Flash Cards. While the content was different, I definitely felt like seeing some sample questions helped me be more prepared for the test. (And let me tell you – they put some tricky questions on there!) I also felt like the PPI sample questions were closer to the actual test questions than any others that I came across.

Choices, Charts & Changes

The test format is multiple-choice, all on computer. The actual exam closely resembles a PowerPoint presentation. You go through the questions, answering them (or not) as you go. If you feel shaky about a question, you are able to “mark” it, which means that you push a little button at the bottom right of the screen to remind you to review it at the end.

Before you “quit” the exam, a chart will pop up. It will have all of the questions in the first column with little symbols for whether you marked it and whether you completed the question or left it blank. On my first spin through the exam, I felt like I was marking every other question, but at the end, I had only marked about 15.

Going back to those questions at the end is helpful, because taking the rest of the exam may have sparked something for you that you forgot the first time. Although, remember to use caution in changing answers on questions that you didn’t mark. As is true on most tests, your “gut instinct” is usually correct. One of the girls in my study group was taking the test for the second time, and she felt strongly that if she had not gone back and changed most of her answers, based on other questions, that she would have passed it the first time.

Ready, Set, Prep

Now for how to actually tackle the LEED AP Exam beast. I can’t speak for anyone but myself, so it is only my own opinions that are being shared and should not be taken as the gospel. However, from Google-ing the words “LEED AP Exam,” I found several discussion boards, and it seems as though my experience isn’t too far off the norm.

I decided to take the LEED AP Exam because a professor encouraged me to do so. Six other interior design students, the professor, and I divided the Reference Guide into eight sections. We each took a section to study and summarize and present to the group. We met twice a week and plodded through the entire book, one section at a time. I am not normally successful in studying with a group, but studying this way helped me to persevere through the entire thing. I would recommend this because some parts of the book get a little dense, and it’s convenient to be able to talk things out.

The week before the exam, I went back through and read the entire book, cover to cover. (Don’t leave out the intro part – there are questions that come from it!) As daunting of a task as it is, it’s something that needs to be done, as several of the questions require knowledge about details from the text. The sample questions on the USGBC website are evidence to that.

The night before the exam, I made two lists. (I admit it – I’m a list person.) One was for which Referenced Standards applied to which Credits, and the other one for what person is responsible for signing off on the Submittal Templates. (I think that list is the ONLY reason that I passed the Coordinate Project and Team Section!) My husband and several (successful) people on the discussion boards made spreadsheets of the same information, so whichever way works best for you, just make sure you get the information somehow.

In addition, my husband and I both had the flash cards. He felt like his really helped for NC, but I never even looked at mine for CI. The flip side is that I found his sample exam to be helpful, while he did not. But you know how you study best, so make a decision based on that.

Oh, Just Green Up!

As crazy as the exam and process sound, it really is not that scary. When it was all said and done, the experience wasn’t any worse than taking the SAT (or the ACT), and we all survived that. So if you are looking to become more sustainably-minded or move up in the A&D world, then put taking the LEED AP Exam on your career to-do list. In the meantime, good luck and stay classy.