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Five things you should know to pass the LEED AP exam

June 17, 2009 - Construction Design & Engineering

If you are like me, and took your last standardized test when Bruce Springsteen was "Dancing in the Dark", then you might want to read this if you plan on passing the LEED AP exam.

Administered by the U.S. Green Building Council, the Leadership in Environmental and Energy Design Accredited Professional (LEED AP) exam is used to license individuals who are interested in the LEED building certification process.

Anecdotally, more than 50% of first-time LEED AP test takers fail and most barely achieve the 170 of 200 points needed to pass. The most prevalent reason for failure? Inadequate preparation for a test that requires both reasoning ability and rote memorization.

Although the USGBC is presently moving to Version 3 of the LEED AP exam, the strategy to pass the exam is not expected to change.

Some things you can do to increase your chances of passing the exam:

1. Take a class - This will improve your chances greatly as it makes your study time more efficient. The Everblue Training Institute (www.everblueenergy.com) offers a two-day intensive suitcase class and provides study spreadsheets and practice questions to prepare for the exam. A quick internet search of "LEED AP" will also yield a variety of other class offerings, sample tests and study aids (spreadsheets, "flashcards" etc). If you are not taking a class, strongly consider buying the USGBC Reference Guide at usgbc.org.
2. Schedule the exam - Scheduling of the LEED AP exam is done through the USGBC website (usgbc.org). Plan on 40 to 60 hours of study, maybe half if you took a class. Schedule the test in a short enough amount of time that it demands your focus, but budget enough time that you can complete your study by exam day. If possible, pick a time of day in which you are most alert.
3. Study routine - When studying, review your study aids and answer sample questions; your objective is to simulate exam day. If you did not take a class, make or buy the study aids. Unless you are making your own aids, I would not recommend reading the two-inch thick Reference Guide cover to cover. Consider using mnemonics for rote memorization. Concentrate on any sample questions you got wrong.
4. Pre-exam - Know where you are going and get there early. Sit in your car for one last study aid review and then decompress for 10 to 15 minutes (listening to sports talk radio worked for me).
5. The exam - The test has 80 questions. You have two hours — plenty of time. Read each question carefully and do not stress! Before the two hours start, you have up to 15 minutes for a computer tutorial. Use the 15 minutes to "mind dump" your rote memorization / mnemonics onto the scrap workbook they give you. If you are spending more than a minute on a question, "mark" it and move on. At the end of the test, you can go back to answer any question you may have "marked". There is no penalty for guessing.

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