Defining Features of Quality Certification and Assessment-Based Certificate Programs

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DEFINING FEATURES OF QUALITY CERTIFICATION AND ASSESSMENT-BASED CERTIFICATE PROGRAMS

Introduction

Established in 1977, the Institute for Credentialing Excellence (ICE, formerly the National Organization for Competency Assurance) is dedicated to promoting excellence in credentialing worldwide. It is the leader in setting quality standards for credentialing organizations and through its division, the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA), has provided more than 30 years of accrediting services to the credentialing industry. ICE is accredited by the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) as a developer of American National Standards.

The ICE Board recognized that quality assessment-based certificate programs, through the instruction and training they provide, play a valuable role in helping individuals to attain occupational/professional competence and thus, relate to ICE's mission of promoting excellence in credentialing. Furthermore, the Board noted that assessment-based certificate programs have some functions in common with professional or personnel certification, namely, identifying and evaluating the knowledge, skills, and competencies requisite to effectively performing occupational and professional roles. In January 2007, it established a Certificate Task Force, comprised of ICE members and other key parties, to:

(a) identify characteristics of quality certification and assessment-based certificate programs;
(b) outline the distinguishing features of each; and
(c) explore what ICE's future role might be with respect to assessment-based certificate programs.

The work of the Certificate Task Force was incorporated in this document, which highlights the similarities and differences between quality certification and assessment-based certificate programs.

Purpose

The purpose of this document is to aid stakeholders in gaining a better understanding of the distinctions between assessment-based certificate programs, certificates of attendance or participation, and professional or personnel certification programs. The document focuses on 12 key aspects of certification and assessment-based certificate programs:

- Primary Focus of the Program
- Content of the Program and How It Is Identified
- Program Oversight
- Provider Role in Education and Training
- Education and Training Requirements and Prerequisites
- Assessment
- Validation of Assessment Content

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- Standard Setting
- Evaluation of Assessments
- Credential Maintenance
- Identification of Individuals Who Have Completed Program
- Statement of Program Purpose

NOTE: The features of quality professional or personnel certification programs described in this document are derived from the National Commission for Certifying Agencies' *Standards for the Accreditation of Certification Programs* (www.credentialingexcellence.org/ncca).

Definitions

An assessment-based certificate program is a non-degree granting program that:

(a) provides instruction and training to aid participants in acquiring specific knowledge, skills, and/or competencies associated with intended learning outcomes;
(b) evaluates participants' achievement of the intended learning outcomes; and
(c) awards a certificate only to those participants who meet the performance, proficiency or passing standard for the assessment(s) (hence the term, "assessment-based certificate program").

Distinctions Between Assessment-Based Certificates and Certificates of Attendance or Participation

Certificates of attendance or participation are provided to individuals (participants) who have attended or participated in classes, courses, or other education/training programs or events. The certificate awarded at the completion of the program or event signifies that the participant was present and in some cases that the participant actively participated in the program or event. Demonstration of accomplishment of the intended learning outcomes by participants is NOT a requirement for receiving the certificate; thus, possession of a certificate of attendance or participation does not indicate that the intended learning outcomes have been accomplished by the participant. These are key distinctions between a certificate of attendance or participation and an assessment-based certificate program.

Distinctions Between Assessment-Based Certificates and Professional or Personnel Certification Programs

Professional or personnel certification is a voluntary process by which individuals are evaluated against predetermined standards for knowledge, skills, or competencies. Participants who demonstrate that they meet the standards by successfully completing the assessment process are granted

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a time-limited credential. To retain the credential, certificants must maintain continued competence. The credential awarded by the certification program provider denotes that the participant possesses particular knowledge, skills, or competencies.

Whereas the focus of an assessment-based certificate program is on education/training, the focus of professional/personnel certification is on the assessment of participants. Moreover, the assessment is independent of a specific class, course or other education/training program and also independent of any provider of classes, courses, or programs. The assessments are NOT designed to evaluate mastery of the intended learning outcomes of a specific class, course or education/training program and the certification program provider is NOT the sole provider of any education or training that may be required for certification.

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Feature	Certification[1]	Assessment-Based Certificate Program[2]
Primary Focus of the Program	The primary focus of a professional/personnel certification program is on providing an independent[3] assessment of the knowledge, skills, and/or competencies required for competent performance of an occupational or professional role or specific work-related tasks and responsibilities. Certification also is intended to measure or enhance continued competence through recertification or renewal requirements. The certification awarded designates that participants have demonstrated the requisite, work-related knowledge, skills, or competencies and met other requirements established by the certification program provider (e.g., academic degree, specified number of years of occupational or professional experience).	The primary focus of an assessment-based certificate program is on facilitating the accomplishment of intended learning outcomes. Although assessment is an integral part of the certificate program, the primary purpose of the program is to provide education and training which supports the accomplishment of the intended learning outcomes. The certificate awarded designates that participants have completed the required education/training and demonstrated accomplishment of the intended learning outcomes.

[1] The features of quality professional or personnel certification programs as described in this document are derived from the National Commission for Certifying Agencies' *Standards for the Accreditation of Certification Programs*.
[2] Assessment-based certificate programs are distinct from certificates of attendance/participation in that they require successful completion of an end-of-program assessment to confirm participants' accomplishment of the intended learning outcomes.
[3] The assessment is independent of a specific class, course or other education/training program and also independent of any provider of classes, courses, or programs. The assessment is NOT designed to evaluate mastery of the intended learning outcomes of a specific class, course or education/training program and the certification program provider is NOT the sole provider of any education or training that may be required for certification.

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Feature	Certification[1]	Assessment-Based Certificate Program[2]
Content of the Program and How It Is Identified	The content of a professional/personnel certification program is based on the knowledge, skills, or competencies required for competent performance of an occupational or professional role or specific work-related tasks and responsibilities. The knowledge, skills, and competencies that are the focus of the certification program are identified through a formal study (e.g., job/practice analysis, role delineation). Program content is defined by job incumbents and/or employers through the formal job/practice analysis or role delineation process. The knowledge, skills, and competencies targeted by the certification program are periodically updated, as needed, based on the findings of a formal study (e.g., job/practice analysis, role delineation) to ensure that the certification program continues to reflect current occupational or professional practice.	The content of an assessment-based certificate program may include knowledge, skills, or competencies related to: (a) an occupational or professional role or specific work-related tasks and responsibilities; or (b) general interest or leisure pursuits (e.g., first aid, sailing). The intended learning outcomes and associated knowledge, skills, and competencies that are the focus of the education/training are identified through a systematic analysis of the needs of: (a) participants; (b) industry; (c) consumers; and/or (d) other identified stakeholders. The content of the program (education/training and assessment) is reviewed periodically and updated, as needed, by subject-matter experts and qualified individuals to ensure that it remains current and accurate and consistent with generally accepted instructional design and measurement principles.
Program Oversight	A governing body with representation from relevant stakeholders[4] is charged with oversight of the certification program. This body is legally or administratively autonomous from other entities and maintains control over all essential decisions related to certification activities.	A governing body with oversight responsibilities for the assessment-based certificate program is NOT required; however, the program should function with input from subject-matter experts and qualified individuals, who assist in development, delivery, and evaluation of the program.

[4] **Stakeholders** are the various groups with an interest in the quality, governance, and operation of a certification program, such as candidates, certificants, employers, regulators, customers/clients and the public.

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Feature	Certification	Assessment-Based Certificate Program
Provider Role in Education and Training	The certification program provider conducts the certification program independently of any educational/training programs. That is, the assessment is NOT linked to a specific class, course or other education/training program or to a specific provider of classes, courses, or programs. The assessment is NOT designed to evaluate mastery of the intended learning outcomes of a specific class, course or education/training program, nor is the certification program provider the sole provider of any education or training that may be required for certification. The certification program provider also is not responsible for accreditation[5] of educational or training programs or courses of study leading to the certification.	The certificate program provider conducts or sponsors the education/training that is required for the certificate. The assessment is aligned with the education/training and is designed to evaluate accomplishment of the intended learning outcomes that the provider has identified for the class, course, or program.
Education and Training Requirements and Prerequisites	Eligibility requirements may include completion of specific education/training; however, the certification program provider is NOT the sole provider of any education/training that may be required for certification. Nor is the certification program provider responsible for accreditation of educational or training programs or courses of study leading to the certification.	The program requires completion of education/training offered or sponsored by the certificate provider. There may be other prerequisites in addition to the education/training required to attain the certificate.

[5] **Accreditation** is the voluntary process by which a nongovernmental agency grants a time-limited recognition to an institution, organization, business, or other entity after verifying that it has met predetermined and standardized criteria.

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Feature	Certification	Assessment-Based Certificate Program
Assessment	The purpose of the assessment process is to evaluate mastery of the knowledge, skills, or competencies required for certification. Any generally accepted assessment method may be utilized for this purpose. The assessment takes place *after* the participant has had the opportunity to acquire the targeted knowledge, skills, or competencies. The assessment is conducted in a standardized manner in a secure, proctored environment. Successful completion of the assessment is required to receive the certification.	Both formative and summative assessments are typically conducted. The purpose of formative assessment is to provide feedback to both participants and facilitators/instructors with the intent of enhancing the learning process. Formative assessment may include self-reflection and diagnostic components (e.g., pretest) and may be remedial (i.e., focusing on correction or improvement). Formative assessment may take place on one or more occasions throughout the learning process. Summative (end-of-program) assessment is used to evaluate participants' accomplishment of the intended learning outcomes and generally takes place at the completion of the education/training component of the program. Any generally accepted assessment method may be utilized for conducting the summative assessment. The certificate program provider ensures that the environments in which the assessment is conducted are comparable. Any additional specifications pertaining either to how the assessments should be conducted or the required level of security should be consistent with the intended purpose of the certificate program. Successful completion of the summative assessment is required to receive the certificate. ***NOTE:*** *If an assessment-based certificate program is promoted by the provider as being appropriate for regulatory purposes or for decision making related to hiring, promotion, and other key employment-related outcomes (e.g., hospital privileging for physicians), the assessment(s) should be developed and evaluated/scored in a manner that is consistent with generally accepted measurement principles and legally defensible. The assessment(s) also should be administered in a secure, proctored environment.*

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Feature	Certification	Assessment-Based Certificate Program
Validation of Assessment Content	The process of validating the content of the assessment includes: (a) a formal study (e.g., job/practice analysis, role delineation) conducted in accordance with generally accepted practice; and (b) documentation of the link between the study findings and the knowledge, skills, and competencies represented on the assessment. The assessment content is periodically revised, as needed, based on the findings of a formal job/practice analysis or role delineation process to ensure that it continues to reflect current occupational or professional practice.	The process of validating the content of the assessment includes, at a minimum, documentation of the link between the intended learning outcomes and the assessment (e.g., a table listing the knowledge, skills, and/or competencies needed for participants to accomplish the intended learning outcomes and identifying how the specified knowledge, skills, and/or competencies are covered by the assessment). For high-stakes certificate programs, the validation process should include a job/practice analysis or role delineation. The assessment content is periodically revised, as needed, by subject-matter experts and qualified individuals to ensure that it continues to reflect the scope and purpose of the program and remains aligned with the education/training and the intended learning outcomes.
Standard Setting	The certification program provider uses a generally accepted method for setting the passing standard. This method, in which trained stakeholders participate, should: (a) link the passing standard to the expected performance of individuals who possess the requisite knowledge, skills, or competencies; and (b) be consistent with the nature and intended use of the assessment. The governing body for the certification program retains authority for setting/approving the passing standard.	The certificate provider uses a generally accepted method for setting the performance, proficiency, or passing standard for the summative (end-of-program) assessment. This method, in which trained subject-matter experts participate, should: (a) link the performance, proficiency, or passing standard to the expected performance of a participant who has accomplished the intended learning outcomes; and (b) be consistent with the nature and intended use of the assessment. The certificate provider retains authority for setting/approving the performance, proficiency, or passing standard.
Evaluation of Assessments	The effectiveness of the assessment is evaluated on a regular basis to ensure its ongoing utility for measuring the knowledge, skills, and competencies targeted by the certification program. The procedures and analyses performed for this purpose are consistent with generally accepted measurement principles.	The effectiveness of the assessment is evaluated on a regular basis to ensure its ongoing utility for evaluating participants' accomplishment of the intended learning outcomes. The procedures and analyses performed for this purpose are consistent with generally accepted measurement principles.

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Feature	Certification	Assessment-Based Certificate Program
Credential Maintenance	A certification is time limited (i.e., it will lapse or expire at the end of a predetermined time period if recertification/renewal requirements are not met). To maintain the credential, a certificant is required to engage in specified activities designed to measure or enhance continued competence. Certificants are subject to disciplinary policy.	An assessment-based certificate is generally NOT time limited (i.e., it typically does NOT lapse or expire at the end of a predetermined time period). A certificate holder is generally NOT required to engage in subsequent activities to maintain the certificate; however, in some cases, providers may require additional education, training, and/or assessments for this purpose.
Identification of Individuals Who Have Completed Program	Certificants are "Certified in XYZ" or "Certified XYZ Professionals." (*NOTE: These terms are illustrative; they are not meant to be inclusive or prescriptive*). Certificants are awarded an acronym or letters for use after their names to signify that they have obtained and maintained the credential.	Certificate holders have a "Certificate in XYZ." (*NOTE: This term is illustrative; it is not meant to be inclusive or prescriptive*). Certificate holders are NOT awarded an acronym or letters for use after their names upon completion of the certificate program.
Statement of Program Purpose	Certification program providers publish an explicit statement regarding the primary purpose of the certification program (e.g., to protect the public, to provide employers with a tool for identifying qualified individuals). They also provide guidance to candidates, certificants and other stakeholders as to what inferences can properly be made regarding those who hold the certification. Furthermore, these inferences are consistent with the stated purpose of the certification and the type of assessments, evaluation/scoring procedures, and standard-setting methodologies utilized.	Assessment-based certificate program providers publish an explicit statement regarding the primary purpose of the certificate program (e.g., to assist participants in achieving specified learning outcomes). They also provide guidance to participants, certificate holders and other stakeholders as to what inferences can properly be made regarding those who hold the certificate. Furthermore, these inferences are consistent with the stated purpose of the certificate and the type of assessments, evaluation/scoring procedures, and standard-setting methodologies utilized.

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