Designing Certification and Accreditation Programs

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*I*t is certain that the management of an association (whether it be a national, regional, or state organization) will be confronted, at one time or another, with a request from the board or the membership to determine the feasibility of certification or accreditation as an association service. This request usually becomes the responsibility of the staff person assigned to educational services. In fact, most certification and accreditation programs begin as a project under the aegis of the association's education director.

For senior staff whose major role has been developing and implementing more typical membership services, such as training, publications, meetings, and seminars, the notion of developing a certification or an accreditation program may seem formidable. Many questions surface immediately:

1. How do accreditation and certification programs differ? Aren't they the same thing?

2. Why should the association certify or accredit? What is the need for such a program? What are the benefits and disadvantages for the association and the membership?

3. Who will develop accreditation and certification standards? The staff? A special committee? How will agreement about the standards be achieved?

4. Will the association be more vulnerable legally if it sponsors such programs? Is it worth the risk?

5. How are such programs developed? What sort of expertise is necessary for program development? Will volunteers be involved?

6. How are these programs governed and managed?

7. How much funding is required to develop a program? What will be the source of funding? Will the program ever be self-sustaining?

This chapter will provide you with a foundation to address the feasibility of developing a credentialing program. The issues that must be addressed to launch a successful credentialing program will be described.

What Is Credentialing?

Credentialing is a complicated concept with some degree of confusion about terminology. The words "licensure," "accreditation," and "certification" are frequently used interchangeably when credentialing is discussed.

> **Licensure:** The process by which an agency of government grants permission to persons to engage in a given profession or occupation by certifying that those licensed have attained the minimal degree of competency necessary to ensure that the public health, safety and welfare will be reasonably well protected (HEW 1971b).

From *The Association Educator's Toolkit* (2000). American Society of Association Executives.

Although the intention is to protect the public, licensure procedures are lobbied for, developed, and controlled mainly by the licensed occupations and professions. Boards and other regulatory bodies in conjunction with their public members must be vigilant in creating processes that ensure the public that licensure is not merely serving the self-interests of the professions, occupations, and individuals covered by the licensure act.

A license cannot guarantee competent and safe performance or ensure the protection of the public in perpetuity. Almost all licensure acts include relicensure requirements or disciplinary action as mechanisms to provide assurance of continuing competence to the public. Again, the effectiveness of relicensure requirements is directly related to the extent to which these procedures are under the control of the regulated occupations and professions and are properly enforced and monitored by the regulatory body.

> **Accreditation:** The process whereby an association or agency grants public recognition to a school, institute, college, university, or specialized program of study having met certain established qualifications or standards as determined through initial and periodic evaluations (Pennel, Proffit & Hatch 1971).

The functions of accreditation and certification are distinct processes that should be carried out by agencies independent of one another. This independence is designed to avoid the appearance of a conflict of interest. However, accreditation and certification agencies typically are spin-offs from a parent membership or trade association. Thus, these are processes designed, and somewhat controlled, by professional interests.

The connection between accreditation and certification is that frequently graduation from an accredited education or training program is required for licensure or certification. The fairness of this requirement could be questioned. If the certification candidate is required to demonstrate skills or competence, does it matter where or how someone has learned skills as long as they can meet the agreed-on standards of competent

performance? On the other hand, if the certification process does not include some form of performance assessment, graduation from an accredited education or training program takes on more importance because it provides some added assurance of consistency of training outcomes and the supervision of practice.

> **Standardization:** The process by which a product or service is assessed against standards and specifications, such as the Underwriters' Laboratory seal on electrical fixtures or self-audits done by companies that want to show compliance to national or international standards, such as American National Standards Institute guidelines and ISO 9000 standards (ASAE 1987).

A number of industries have developed standards for their products. The National Institute of Standards and Technology of the U.S. Department of Commerce lists 468 of these organizations. The publishing of standards does not guarantee that a product manufactured by a company that attests to meeting the standards does in fact meet the standards. Consumers can be assured that the purchased product or service meets industry standards only if the organization that develops standards has a program to determine whether companies and their products and services comply with the standards.

> **Certification:** A voluntary process by which a nongovernmental agency or association grants recognition to an individual who has met certain predetermined qualifications specified by that agency or association. Such qualifications may include graduation from an accredited or approved training program, acceptable performance on a qualifying examination, and/or completion of some specified amount or type of work experience
> (HEW 1971a).

Although certification is thought to be voluntary, the attained certificate may take on increased value so that it has the power and mandate of a license. For example, for a physician to qualify for professional

privileges to practice surgery in most hospitals, the physician must hold a current and valid certificate from the American Board of Surgery (ABS). ABS is a voluntary medical specialty board approved by the "accrediter" of specialty boards, the American Board of Medical Specialties.

To confuse the issue even further, states may use the terms "certification" and "licensure" interchangeably. In most states, professionals, such as teachers, nurses' aides in long-term care facilities, emergency medical technicians, and police officers, must meet specific state requirements, which usually include an examination. If the requirements are met, the individuals become certified to practice in the states. Clearly, certification in this case is equivalent to a license. If an individual was found practicing without a certificate in a state where a certificate is required, that individual would be practicing illegally.

The following are some similarities and distinctions among these concepts:

1. Certification and licensure are for individuals, whereas accreditation is meant for organizations. Standardization is directed toward products and processes.

2. Licensure is mandatory and regulatory, whereas all the other processes are voluntary and are initiated at the will and desire of individuals, institutions, or companies.

3. All high-quality licensure, accreditation, standardization, and certification programs involve the development of standards.

4. In all the processes, the agencies or organizations developing and monitoring the standards have an obligation and responsibility to candidates to create credentialing processes that are valid and unbiased.

5. Candidates seeking any of these credentials must be given full information about these processes, their rationale, and procedures. Also, they must be afforded the privileges of appeals and due process.

In summary, there are different words for what might appear, on the surface, to be different processes. On the other hand, it is clear that there is a blurring of definitions that has become part of the everyday use of the terms. Certification sometimes amounts to a license when required by a state. Accreditation may require a standardization of products. Although all the processes have at their core consumer protection and satisfaction, the impetus toward any kind of credentialing usually comes directly from the profession itself. The profession could be represented by one or several associations. Even licensure has significant input from the licensed profession and is invariably responsive to professional interests. Associations have played a major role in developing and monitoring standards and credentialing programs and professional practice.

Definitions in a Nutshell

1. *Certification* and *licensure* are for individuals.

2. *Accreditation* is meant for organizations or programs.

3. *Standardization* is directed toward products or processes.

The Purpose of Credentialing

The purpose of most credentialing programs is to elevate the credibility and professionalism of the members of the associations developing and promulgating the standards and to elevate the quality of products and services delivered by certified individuals. In a number of occupations and professions where the safety and protection of the public is involved—such as in healthcare, real estate, and finance—certification and accreditation are attempts at self-regulation, an active strategy to fend off the possibility of federal and state regulation.

Prevalence of Credentialing

No complete list of organizations that offer certification programs in the United States exists; however, estimates range from 600 to 1,500 entities, with the numbers growing significantly each year, particularly in healthcare.

These organizations have created programs for every type of occupational and professional endeavors imaginable. They sponsor programs that certify picture framers, travel agents, tennis pros, and auto mechanics. Standards have been developed for practitioners in more technical fields, such as medical sonography and neurosurgery. In a sense, these organizations have appointed themselves to represent a particular occupation or profession for the purpose of developing and maintaining knowledge and practice standards. Typically, these programs are initially developed through the sponsorship of professional membership or trade associations, spun off, and then administered by an organization incorporated independently as the certifying agency.

The number of accreditation programs in this country is probably half again as large. Accreditation is a process developed mainly for private and public education. All public schools, colleges, universities, and proprietary training institutions are subject to accreditation by national or regional accreditation agencies. These institutions typically undergo self-study and site visits by expert peers trained for this purpose to demonstrate that they meet accreditation standards. Although this is a "voluntary" activity, institutions would not be able to attract students or obtain federal, state or local funding without this credential.

Most major disciplines have developed accreditation standards. Law, medicine, business, architecture allied health specialties, psychology, and education are just a few examples of professional disciplines that have developed educational standards for programs offered in postsecondary institutions.

As soon as an emerging profession or specialty has an agreed-on core technical training or curriculum essentials and educational or training programs are providing these essentials, accreditation becomes a natural next step. Pharmacy technicians, for example, are emerging allied health specialists. At first, technicians were trained on the job. In the past decade, numerous educational and training programs have been developed and offered at a variety of locations. Because pharmacists are responsible for the work of technicians as part of their licensed responsibilities, they became concerned about the quality, appropriateness, and completeness of the training offered. The American Society of Health-System Pharmacists has developed standards for pharmacy technician training programs and now has an accreditation service for these programs.

In today's environment, accreditation has become much broader in meaning than training. This is especially true in the healthcare field. As healthcare reform initiatives become more prevalent, more programs, corporations, laboratories, and facilities will see the need for accreditation. For example, the American Hospital Association, through the Joint Commission on the Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations, accredits U.S. hospitals and other types of healthcare facilities. The Electronic Healthcare Network Accreditation Commission accredits companies that process healthcare transactions for payers and deliverers.

Certification or Accreditation?

In the past, in an emerging specialty, training and education came first to define the academic requirements necessary for competent practice. Then the certification program was developed. More recently, the press for self-regulation has been so great that associations are considering developing certification first, then accreditation programs, or even developing both accreditation and certification at the same time.

The important point for associations to note is that the market should be tested to determine which type of program has the best chance of being successful after launch. Your association leadership should recognize that staff and volunteer resources are sorely strained when credentialing programs are being developed. Developing both accreditation and certification programs at the same time is a daunting task.

Many agencies sponsoring certification are not the only group representing the specialty being credentialed. In a number of occupational or professional areas, such as medical laboratory science, there is a confusing array of certificates and accreditation offered to aspiring candidates. Therefore, there is a great deal of competition among credentialing agencies in offering similar certificates or designations to the same candidate pool.

For this reason, associations should take into consideration any licensure or certification programs already in existence that may duplicate or partially overlap with the new programs being considered. If there are similarities, consider including these organizations among the stakeholders involved in program development, form partnerships or coalitions to further the development of standards and credentials, or reassess the proposed credentialing niche and determine whether it is in the best interest of the membership and the public at large.

In a fast-moving era of scarce resources, more and more strategic alliances will be formed to develop and promote credentialing.

Costs

Professional and occupational credentialing is a significant enterprise, with the largest voluntary certification program processing 200,000 candidates a year. The smallest programs process fewer than 100 candidates per year. Fees for certification range from $15 for automotive mechanics to $1,900 for skin cancer surgeons. The total amount of fees paid for certification in the United States is not known. Accreditation although usually smaller in candidate volume, usually involves higher fees. Many accreditation programs require a site visit, which can be expensive, depending on the duration of the visit and number of expert reviewers evaluating the program.

Credentialing is an expensive business. The costs of a typical program depend on the magnitude of record keeping procedures, the complexity of the assessment procedures, the quality of the validation and monitoring efforts, and the number of candidates participating in the program. Program development costs would be above and beyond these ongoing expenses.

Relationship of Certification to Licensure and Training

Certification programs are voluntary. However, some certification agencies have lobbied and have been successful in having their certificates written into legislation as a requirement for licensure in an attempt to ensure the public health and safety and to define for the professional a scope of practice. For example, the National Occupational Therapy Credentials Board and the American Dietetic Association's Council on Dietetic Registration have lobbied to have these credentials accepted as one of the requirements for state licensure. All states now accept their credential.

Other associations prefer to keep their self-regulatory efforts as far removed from mandatory state regulatory processes as possible.

A typical model for certification is one in which training is intertwined with assessment component organizations, such as the Registered Apartment Manager program sponsored by the National Association of Home Builders, the Certified Association Executive program of the American Society of Association Executives, and the Accredited Residential Manager program of the Institute of Real Estate Management. These programs require specific training courses and prescribed contact hours that can be attained through their association training offerings.

Some of these programs are reconsidering their structure and goals. They realize that the certifications offered under their present arrangement may appear to be self-serving because of the revenue gained from training products and services. In addition, this requirement limits access to the credential by not providing more flexible routes and opportunities to candidates to fulfill certification requirements.

In summary, credentialing is definitely here to stay, and the number of programs is growing rapidly. What are the reasons for this proliferation of programs?

1. The consumer has become more vigilant, demanding quality. This demand is exacerbated by the media's constant attention to shoddy—sometimes dangerous— products and service delivery. Credentialing is designed to meet this consumer concern.

2. Healthcare reform has as its cornerstone access to quality care for all Americans at the lowest possible cost. This goal implies standards for delivery of care will be forthcoming. Only accredited facilities and certified healthcare deliverers will be reimbursed by payers. It is not surprising that most of the new entries in accreditation and certification are in the healthcare environment.

3. Standards are needed for American industries to compete successfully in a global economy Common-market countries are requiring that companies that engage in international commerce (and many do) meet standards such as ISO 9000 requirements.

What Can Certification and Accreditation Do and Not Do?

Credentialing is driven by industry or professional standards. It is usually spearheaded and developed by associations or organizations. Therefore, associations need to be clear about the purposes and outcomes of certification that are promised by the organization. This should be conveyed clearly and widely to the public. Certification does not guarantee competence to the public; accreditation cannot guarantee quality.

The sponsoring organizations can guarantee that the organization receiving accreditation and the individual receiving certification have met the standards as developed by the profession through the organization and as demonstrated through the organizations' accreditation and/or certification procedures. To promise any more would be imprudent. Not even licensure or standardization can guarantee consistent, safe, and effective delivery of products and services by licensees.

What Certification and Accreditation Can and Cannot Do

- can promote and maintain professional standards

- can keep pace with new developments in the field

- can be effective quality-improvement mechanisms

- cannot guarantee quality

- cannot guarantee competence

Components of a Quality Certification Program

The following components are essential for creating quality credentialing programs:

- thorough needs analysis
- industry/professional consensus on purpose
- independent governance
- appropriate and supportive bylaws
- advance public information and marketing
- market- and cost-driven fees
- defensible eligibility requirements
- valid assessment based on work-related standards
- accessibility
- procedures to monitor adverse impact
- detailed grievance/appeals procedures
- standards review and maintenance
- post-credentialing procedures that provide quality assurance

Thorough Needs Analysis

Most credentialing programs are conceived by ad hoc committees or task forces. Although well intentioned, these committees often do not investigate the market demand or the feasibility of the program being proposed. What seems to be a winning idea to the leadership may fall on deaf ears among the ranks of employers and potential candidates.

A needs analysis has the following benefits:

- leads to the creation of a market-responsive credentialing program
- gathers viewpoints from various constituencies to inform decision-making
- directs the path of program development
- begins the marketing process
- increases the credibility of the organization
- broadens the possibilities of funding by including interested parties

- informs the go/no-go development decision with actual statistics and market data
- assists in a quicker rollout and acceptance of the resulting program

The cost of needs analysis is money that is well-spent It would include focus groups, interviews, and surveys that can be done over a short period of time and would give the answers to important marketing and development questions, such as the following:

1. What is needed to get the message about certification and accreditation across to the leadership, membership, and other stakeholders?

2. What would be the drawbacks of accreditation and certification to the profession?

3. What should the eligibility requirements be?

4. How much would individuals or organizations be willing to pay for the credential?

5. What assessment or evaluation methods are most acceptable to the marketplace?

6. What materials will be needed to prepare candidates for the credentialing process?

7. On what content areas should the standards focus?

8. How can the quality and credibility of the credentials be ensured?

9. If the credential was offered next year, how many candidates would apply?

Even if an association has paid particular attention to building demand among the various stakeholders through a needs analysis and other approaches, such as task forces, newsletters, publications, forums, and conferences, program development is a risky business. Much will depend on the perceived value of the credential for the industry, members, employers, and the public, good marketing, the credentialing fee and who pays it, and ease of access to the credential.

Industry/Professional Consensus on Purpose

Often a small group or committee decides what the mission and purpose of the credential will be without consulting with the customer (potential candidates, employers, and other stakeholders). The mission and purpose of credentialing chart the direction of development and, therefore, are ultimately very important to the success of the program. It is critical to include all relevant stakeholders when forging these important statements.

Mission and purpose are related to what the program promises and the appropriate uses of the credential. For example, if the purpose of a certification program is to protect the public, then the program policies and certification assessment procedures should focus on those skills, knowledge, and abilities that are critical to public safety and protection. If the credential is to be used for hiring and promotion, then the certifying agency must design an assessment process that is job-related and assesses the knowledge, skills, and abilities that predict success on the job. If the certification system is designed to protect the public, it cannot be used for hiring and promotion decisions.

Credentialing agencies have become wary of promising the public too much. For example, there is a limit on what an individual's certificate, based on education obtained, experience, or the passing of written examination, can guarantee. Such certification procedures cannot guarantee any level of performance or guarantee consistent competent performance on any job.

For this reason, if your association offers a credential, it must be clear about what it is assessing and ultimately credentialing. Is it competence, knowledge, practice, skills, experience, or quality? More and more certificates contain language similar to the following:

> This certificate attests or proves that the individual (or program) named above has met all the requirements of the (name of the credentialing body company, or institution) in the year of ____.

Thus, the value of the credential rests on the extent to which broad consensus has been obtained about the requirements, the rigorousness of the requirements, the attention to which the agency monitors the credential, and the program procedures and processes.

As a credential becomes more valuable and accepted, it becomes more high-stakes, thus resulting in increased legal vulnerability. This could lead to misuse or abuse of the credential (e.g., the use of the credential for purposes other than those it was created for or the misrepresentation of an individual's or organization's status). If your organization plans to credential, it will have to create guidelines for the appropriate use of the credential and its trademark and develop procedures for monitoring its use.

Independent Governance

Antitrust and restraint-of-trade case law indicates that the agency offering a credential should be administratively and fiscally independent from any related trade, professional, or educational associations or special interests. This is to avoid the appearance of a conflict of interest or restraint of trade. Credentialing could generate significant non-dues revenue, as could related products and services, thus raising questions as to the real purpose of the program.

Another reason for independence is that the membership organization could become more legally vulnerable because of its responsibility for a membership service that involves higher stakes for individuals and organizations than those services traditionally under its governance. Decisions about individuals' competence to perform occupational or professional duties or functions are high-risk for those who are seeking recognition, even if the credential is not mandated. Credentialing is expensive in terms of time and money, and not achieving the credentialed status may affect how the candidate is viewed by the industry.

The history of credentialing in this country reveals that most programs are spawned from the efforts of membership or trade associations.

Typically, the organization appoints a task force or planning group to determine the feasibility of a credentialing program because of a request from the membership.

If a decision is made to move forward, this committee, in an advisory capacity, creates the bylaws, structure, and a business and marketing plan for developing, implementing, and governing the program. Often members of the committee move into governing positions as board members for the credentialing entity to ensure continuity of the process. The composition of the governing entity should reflect the stakeholder groups that need to be involved in the development process. In addition, appointing public members (consumer interests) who have no obvious inherent self-interests would provide a healthy balance to the governance structure. These activities should lead to the creation of a credentialing body independent of the parent organization.

At times, because of financial considerations, the unbundling of the credentialing function comes after the program has been developed. The alternative is to initially launch the program independently and obtain seed money or a loan from the parent organization or other sources to fund the development process.

In any case, separating the infant program from its mother organization is often fraught with politics, emotions and tensions, thus threatening the health and credibility of the new enterprise. The length of the separation process is in direct proportion to the amount of time the credentialing function has been under the association's wing.

Appropriate and Supportive Bylaws

Other aspects of governance and administration can fall easily into place after forming an independent organization. These involve the development of nuts-and-bolts procedures derived from an informative set of bylaws. Bylaws are the supporting structure for boards to function in an effective manner. They are the organization's road map. Bylaws should include general descriptions of the program, purpose of the board, the board's structure (including the appointment of board members, officers, and committees), and staff.

By far the most important section of the bylaws outlines the composition of the board, how board members are nominated, terms of office, and so forth. This section of the bylaws has far-reaching ramifications in terms of leadership and board effectiveness and must be drafted carefully

Because it is assumed that board members would serve as volunteers, arrangements must be put into place for appropriate staffing and space to support the board, its committees, and their functions, and to carry out the credentialing organization's responsibilities.

Advance Public Information and Marketing

Often program development moves at a fast pace without a good communications plan and advance publicity. More than once a credentialing program has been developed quickly, perhaps within nine to twelve months, only to find that the number of applications for the first examination administration or for the first accreditation cycle far less than what had been projected. This lack of interest could be because the board has not allowed enough time for information to reach the market and for the market to respond. Credentialing candidates, whether they are individuals, companies, or educational and training institutions, need time to plan, prepare and gather resources for the credentialing process.

In addition, accreditation and certification boards invariably do not view marketing and communications as a development priority and therefore skimp in the funding of these critical budget items. Marketing and business planning should be initiated early and integrated with the development process. The marketing plan should include items such as a communications calendar, internal and external public relations with news about committee appointments and survey results, opinion surveys about the prospective program at least six months before launch, information about program progress six months after launch, and user-friendly information materials for potential candidates

Market- and Cost-driven Fees

Possibly the most difficult decision for credentialing organizations to make is the amount to charge for the credentialing process. Many factors, such as the projected volume of candidates, cost of developing and operating the program, the capacity of the market to pay, and the value to customers, should be considered. You should consider the following guidelines in setting a candidate fee:

1. Projected volumes should be conservative, to create a realistic fee structure and picture of the program's future.

2. Prepare a business plan that indicates when the program will be self-sustaining. Costs for developing the program should be built into the fee and amortized over three to five years. The amount of development costs projected is dependent on whether development funds were given as a grant to the certification program by a sponsoring program or whether these funds were considered a loan to the certification program or organization.

3. The ability of the market to pay should not be underestimated. Most certification fees are too low mainly because candidates invariably complain that any fee proposed for certification is too high. Note that in some states the fee for a driver's license is higher than some certification fees. A program that has value in the marketplace will be that there is a great deal of price elasticity when setting certification fees.

4. Don't overlook recertification or reaccreditation as a source of income when developing financial projections. These fees need to be set considering similar factors. It is important to effectively market recertification to candidates after they have become certified.

The costs for developing a typical certification program, including validity studies, assessment instrument development (mainly multiple-choice tests), and programming and systems development, could be well over $250,000. Operations costs for a program certifying 10,000 candidates a year could be as high as $1 million. Because most programs do not use performance or product assessments, estimates for the development and implementation of such programs are difficult to determine, but development estimates for performance or product assessments range from $500,000 to $1 million; delivery and program administration costs would range from $250 to $750 per candidate, depending on the complexity of the assessment procedures.

In contrast, a certification system using multiple-choice tests that examines 200,000 candidates per year can charge $15 per candidate and still obtain a comfortable margin for its development reserve fund. Again, the costs of the certification program enterprise depend on the complexity of the assessment procedures and candidate volumes.

The costs of developing an accreditation program are considerably lower (around $100,000). Operational costs are also lower, with major expenses being staff salaries and committee costs. These expenses are about $500,000 per year.

Defensible Eligibility Requirements

In the case of certification, programs publish eligibility requirements, which may include experience, references, educational and training documentation, or other certificates and licenses that attest the individual has undergone the educational, training, work experience, and skills attainment claimed. These are the hurdles the individual has to clear to be eligible for the certification process. For accreditation, these requirements might include financial stability, years in operation, and ability to meet standards.

In high-quality programs, these requirements are not serendipitous. They are forged out of the collective knowledge and experience of experts. These requirements also have to be fair. They must be reasonable and not exclude qualified candidates. For example, if there are a limited number of training programs (as in the case of pharmacy technicians, the majority of whom have on-the-job training), a rigid and prescribed training requirement would be unfair and unnecessarily restrictive. In accreditation, financial statements can change dramatically overnight. Companies or training institutions may not be willing to share this confidential information.

25 Ways to Market Your Professional Certification Program

1. Write a letter from the association's chief elected officer to association leadership (board members, committee members) that outlines the value and benefits of the program and recognizes their contributions to the profession as qualifications to become certified. (Include a response mechanism.)

2. Target various market segments by asking prominent leader(s) in those segments to author a letter that outlines the value and benefits of the certification program. Include a one-page flyer about the basics of the program with a response mechanism to request additional information.

3. Invite current certificants to nominate someone they think is a qualified candidate and ask them to serve as mentor.

4. Schedule optional orientation sessions at all major conventions and at all education programs during lunch or breakfast so as not to conflict with educational programming. Presenters include certification committee chair, recent certificant, and staff explaining the process and benefits.

5. Produce a video about the program, its purpose, value, benefits, and the process. Distribute the video to chapters and affiliated groups.

6. Develop a press kit that includes testimonial articles about the program by recent certificants, program deadline reminders, and order form to obtain promotional materials, such as the video to play during chapter meetings and program brochures.

7, Issue a press release to trade press with a list of new certificants.

8. Develop a generic press release for the new certificants to use.

9. Offer to write the employers of new certificants to recognize the achievement of the certificant.

10. Recognize each new class at a recognition ceremony during the association's major convention or other appropriate event.

11. Schedule a photo session for a new certificant with association and certification committee leadership.

12. Develop special ribbons to recognize new certificants at events.

13. Develop a line of novelty items, such as pins, mugs, stationery, etc.

14. Develop an exclusive invitational function (breakfast or reception with speaker) for all certificants held during a major convention.

15. Check reference file on certification programs/sharing of expertise.

16. Market the certification program to allied/affinity associations.

17. Provide bonus recognition to mentors with special events, etc.

18. Publish a list of new certificants in the trade magazine.

19. Develop a promotional packet describing the advantages of having a certificant as an employee and the value/benefits of the program.

20. Differentiate value and benefits between competing organizations and yours.

21. Publish list of certificants in your membership directory.

22. If there is a financial benefit in terms of salary or legal requirement, promote that benefit.

23. Offer to write the employer of those who recertify to recognize the employees maintaining professionalism and competency.

24. If candidates must have certain education courses or requirements, state the credit value toward designation in educational program brochures.

25. Issue a press release to trade press for those who recertify.

Is a college education or completion of an accredited training or education program necessary for competent performance? Are there physical requirements that are necessary for performance of job functions? Do candidates need specific skills or other certificates, such as CPR certification or certification to operate certain machinery, apparatuses, or instruments? Is experience important? Can the individual practice safely and competently without a certain type or length of experience? If experience, education, physical requirements, and special skills are required, these must be documented and the rationale for these as eligibility requirements must be established.

Valid Assessment and Evaluation Based on Agreed-on Standards

Most occupational and professional licensing and certification programs use content validation as the basis for documenting the appropriateness of their testing and assessment procedures. Both legal guidelines and accepted standards for educational and psychological testing stipulate that the content validity of a licensing or certification examination must be established by an occupational or job analysis. The job analysis provides detailed information about the tasks job incumbents perform and the knowledge and skills necessary for competent performance. Therefore, a national job or occupational analysis should be the first step in certification examination development.

The information derived from the analysis is used to develop a "blueprint" or a set of specifications that defines the domain for the assessment. The content is linked to the tasks the professional must perform, thereby ensuring that the assessment will require that knowledge be used as it is in the actual work setting. These procedures demonstrate and document the job-relatedness of the examination. Many certification programs take great care in documenting the validity of their test development practices as a way of reducing legal vulnerability and candidate complaints.

High-quality certification programs use some form of assessment in addition to training, education, and experience requirements. In most cases, this assessment method has been written multiple-choice examinations. If the skills and abilities to be tested are

of a more cognitive nature, that is, more conceptual and more closely linked to the actual skills or requirements of the job, assessment technique is the most appropriate.

Research has shown that in many fields, multiple-choice test scores are highly correlated with other forms of assessment, such as simulations, although not always predictive of actual work performance.

So-called objective written tests are not without their problems. These instruments usually test knowledge acquisition at the "comprehension" and "application" cognitive levels, with few, if any, questions written at the "synthesis/analysis" and "evaluation" levels. These higher-level cognitive skills reflect complex thinking and reasoning; therefore, the multiple-choice format creates difficulties for content experts who construct the questions. The assessment of such reasoning often cannot be shaped into four-choice questions. If the requirements of the position demand more psychomotor or affective skills, such as are needed for manufacturing delicate instruments or sales and negotiating, performance assessment may be more appropriate.

Why have most agencies selected written tests for assessment? This choice has been based mainly on three criteria: practicality, defensibility, and cost-effectiveness. Although most certifying organizations would admit that they would like to have performance testing as a component in their certification programs, budget constraints have prevented other forms of assessment from being developed and implemented.

The following are some assessment methods that should be considered in developing certification projects:

Multiple-choice tests. These would be particularly suitable for testing job knowledge and technology-specific domains. By using problem- or situation-centered questions, multiple-choice tests can measure critical thinking and analytical abilities. This assessment component could serve as a screen for minimum competency to decide whether further assessment should take place.

Checklists. Continuous improvement and quality assurance programs have proven that checklist reviews of processes or end products can separate the high-performing work environment from the more typical work environments. Checklists can be designed for supervisor or peer review. The assessment could be performed at the work site, and scoring could be done by a third party using predetermined scoring rules.

Interviews. Interviews that lead candidates through a structured probe and questions using a guide can assess domains related to communication, listening, and problem solving. These interviews should be conducted by trained personnel.

Constructed responses. Constructed response assessments are the offspring of the familiar essay examination. Computer-based testing may facilitate capturing the responses and) in some instances, scoring the answers. This technique is used today for certain mathematics ability tests and for cognitive task analyses related to problem solving.

Simulations and case studies. Depending on the complexity of the information presented to the candidate, this assessment may be presented by way of computer. The National Board of Medical Examiners and the National Council of Architects Registry Boards are currently developing state-of-the-art systems to support this question type. This technology runs the gamut from using high-resolution monitors with video/CD-ROM interfaces to simpler CAD/CAM-oriented design tools.

Portfolio review. The selection, collection, and review of actual work performed by a candidate could be an assessment methodology. The breadth and the components of the portfolio would be outlined in assessment specification development. The scoring methodology would be designed by an expert panel, and assessors would be trained to implement the methodology.

Unfortunately, performance assessment is the most expensive and complex form of assessment to develop and administer. For this reason, performance or product assessment in any occupation or profession should be targeted to demonstrating those skills that are most critical to competent performance. This would be the most prudent use of expensive assessment methodologies. For example, if the cosmetic appearance, number of defects, or certain tolerances of a manufactured product are what separates an incompetent or mediocre technician from a high-performing technician, then either an assessment of work samples using agreed-on criteria or a review of work records noting the number of defects/rejects should be part of the assessment system.

Accreditation-guides are explicit and detailed in instructing candidates in preparing for the assessment. Assessment for accreditation involves a process similar to peer review. The accreditation council, commission, or review committee, as well as the trained site visitors, use the accreditation standards and apply them against program documentation. Findings are discussed and consensus is reached on whether the candidate should be accredited. Figure 1 shows a typical accreditation process.
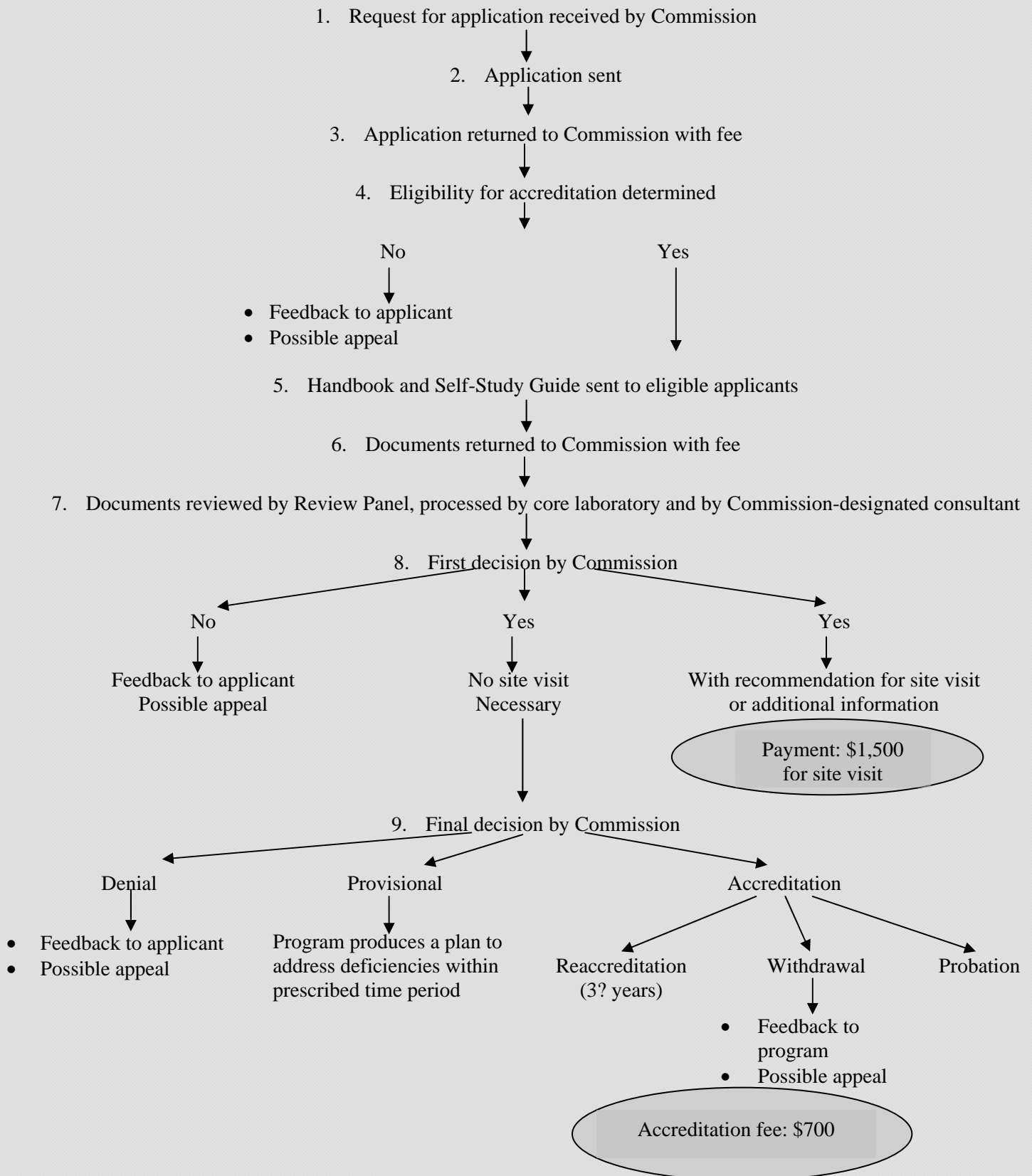
Accessibility

Because of small volumes and financial constraints, a number of programs cannot make certification as accessible to candidates as they would wish. A rule of thumb always has been that testing centers should be no further than a driving distance of 50-100 miles. When a national certification program has a volume of 500 candidates, convenience and accessibility must be sacrificed for practicality and cost-effectiveness.

Typically, candidates are assessed with multiple-choice tests on scheduled dates at designated test centers. This administration function is usually under contract to a testing agency. The major complaint from candidates about these arrangements is they are geographically inconvenient and the timing is not synchronized with readiness to be assessed. Frequently, candidates have to wait six months after completing training before being tested. In addition, official assessment results generally are not available for four to six weeks.

New developments in testing technology allow greater access to assessment and versatility in assessment methodologies. Four computerized testing networks are available in the United States and internationally that have literally thousands of testing

Figure 1.

Nuclear Cardiology
A Model of an Accreditation Process

1. Request for application received by Commission

↓

2. Application sent

↓

3. Application returned to Commission with fee

↓

4. Eligibility for accreditation determined

↓

No   Yes

↓   ↓

- Feedback to applicant
- Possible appeal

5. Handbook and Self-Study Guide sent to eligible applicants

↓

6. Documents returned to Commission with fee

↓

7. Documents reviewed by Review Panel, processed by core laboratory and by Commission-designated consultant

↓

8. First decision by Commission

No   Yes   Yes

↓   ↓   ↓

Feedback to applicant   No site visit   With recommendation for site visit
Possible appeal   Necessary   or additional information

Payment: $1,500
for site visit

↓

9. Final decision by Commission

Denial   Provisional   Accreditation

↓   ↓

- Feedback to applicant   Program produces a plan to   Reaccreditation   Withdrawal   Probation
- Possible appeal   address deficiencies within   (3? years)
                            prescribed time period

- Feedback to
  program
- Possible appeal

Accreditation fee: $700

Designing Certification and Accreditation Programs

centers. These networks are considered "utilities" and can be contracted with by certifying organizations to deliver assessment to candidates on demand. Most of the centers are capable of administering multiple-choice questions, case studies, simulations, free responses, checklists, and fill-in-the-blank test formats. Many of the centers are equipped with CD-ROM. The infrastructure, programming and systems for computer-based testing are readily available now although not always at affordable prices.

Detailed Grievance/Appeals Procedures

Credentialing programs should not be initiated until an appeals process is in place. The process should include the procedures candidates must follow to submit an appeal, timelines for answering appeals (which should be scrupulously adhered to), and the mechanism by which appeals are reviewed, and the procedures candidates must follow to receive a response from the governing board.

The best safeguard against appeals is clear credentialing policies and procedures. An information bulletin should be prepared to include information about fees, deadlines for application, cancellation of applications, how the credentialing decisions are determined, what documentation is needed, eligibility criteria, and an outline of the standards or content used in the assessment process.

Boards typically delegate the appeals process to a committee designated in the bylaws. The appeals committee recommends action to the board after review deliberations are completed. The most frequent appeals to certification programs concern the following:

- conditions under which fees will be returned
- challenges to test scores due to testing irregularities, such as weather emergencies or poor proctoring
- inadequate or inappropriate testing conditions
- requests by candidates to review their assessment materials and scores

The most frequent appeals to accreditation programs concern the following:

- extension of probationary periods
- requests to reconsider the eligibility decision
- challenges to the site visit report and review panel recommendations.

Standards Review and Maintenance

When a program is being launched, developing standards and specifications for assessment and evaluation is an expensive and time-consuming process and can be a daunting task for program developers. It is extremely important to recognize from the outset that initial specifications are only the beginning of the standards-setting process. Standards are perishable and are only as credible as the review and maintenance process adhered to by credentialing boards.

Typically, certification organizations revisit standards every five years by doing another job or occupational analysis. The assumption is that the content of most jobs changes every three to five years. However, most certification organizations cannot afford to revalidate their standards more frequently than every five years. Accreditation standards should be reviewed routinely on a yearly basis by the accreditation commission or council.

Post-Credentialing Procedures

Many certification programs founded ten or twenty years ago did not include recertification renewal procedures. Certificates were lifetime credentials. As the number of voluntary certification programs increased during the '70s and '80s, certification boards became increasingly aware that the credibility of their credentials was questioned if certificates were not time-limited.

For example, none of the physician boards required recertification in 1936. In 1973, the American Board of Medical Specialties passed a resolution urging all its member boards to include periodic recertification as part of all medical specialty programs. At present, all twenty-three boards have endorsed the principle of recertification, although not all have actually developed recertification procedures. Typically, professional and occupational certification programs developed in the past several years have recertification requirements.

The recertification renewal process varies among certification organizations, and few organizations are totally satisfied with their procedures. To keep their credential valid, certified individuals are required to undergo certain evaluative processes to demonstrate

competence, typically after a five-year period. Many of these programs merely seek to provide reasonable assurance that the certified individual has maintained the standards that were originally certified. It also is assumed that the experienced certificant has obtained an advanced level of knowledge and skills.

On one hand, it is important to provide evidence that the individual's knowledge and performance have not deteriorated over time and continue to be current. On the other hand, how can the certification organization recognize the richness of knowledge, skills, and abilities that a worker must develop as new experiences are added to his or her repertoire? Mere recertification of initial skills could encourage mediocrity.

Self-assessment, retesting, and continuing education are some common vehicles used for recertification. The latest trend in certification is to create programs that are flexible and allow candidates to design their own program by accumulating recertification points from a variety of sources, such as continuing education, professional development experiences, self-assessment, and retesting.

Accreditation programs have always had procedures for reaccreditations. Typically, programs are reaccredited every three to five years. The reaccreditation process is usually similar to accreditation. There is a self-study process, site visit, and so forth. However, reaccreditation usually focuses on new areas that a program or institution has developed or revisits areas that were previously cited for improvement.

Summary

1. Before developing credentialing programs, test the marketability and feasibility of the concepts and determine the value added to individuals and the industry.

2. Credentials must be credible to be acknowledged by candidates, employers, the industry, and the public. Credibility rests on the quality of program development procedures and safeguards built into program policies and the governance structure.

3. Pay attention to legal issues, such as antitrust, defensibility of assessment, due process, confidentiality, and privacy, as they relate to credentialing.

4. Develop a business plan with marketing strategies because the costs for developing and operating a credentialing program and the fees paid for credentialing by individuals and companies are significant.

5. Make sure staffing and volunteer resources are available and committed to program development.

Certification Resources

There are a number of resources available to you as you develop your certification program. The following are some key groups in which you might seek involvement.

American Educational Research Association and the National Council on Measurement in Education AERA and NCME

AERA is a membership association of 21,000 individuals interested in research and issues related to educational and psychological measurement. Although much of the association's activities and publications focus on school- and teacher-based research, special interest groups in education in the professions and measurement and research methodology focus on research related to measuring competence and certification.

AERA and **NCME**, working with the American Psychological Association, are responsible for technical standards related to certification and licensure programs. Each year, **AERA** sponsors an annual meeting during which several papers about assessment for licensure and certification are presented. A number of **AERA** publications detail the latest measurement research and provide reviews and commentaries.

Contact: **AERA**; 1230 17th St., NW; Washington, DC 20036-3078, webmaster@aera.net, www.aera.org

American Society of Association Executives (ASAE)

ASAE is one of the largest professional associations in the United States. Its membership ranges from the executive directors of large professional associations, such as the American Electronics Association, to the executive director of the American Automobile Association—New Jersey Chapter. This is virtually the only association in the United States where executive directors and their staffs have a forum to learn about topics related to managing nonprofit associations, membership services, and conference planning. Because certification is a service developed by a significant number of associations, **ASAE** has developed a number of publications related to certification and sponsors events—including a summer conference—devoted to various aspects of voluntary certification.

Contact: Karen Yoho; **ASAE**; 1573 I Street NW; Washington, DC 20005; 202/626-ASAE, kyoho@asaenet.org, www.asaenet.org

National Organization for Competency Assurance (NOCA) and the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA)

NOCA is a membership organization created to provide a forum for all types of organizations interested in learning more about competency assessment, assurance, and certification. **NCCA**, an independent entity linked to **NOCA**, is responsible for setting the standards and approving certification programs for all professions and occupations. In other words, **NCCA** is a voluntary certification program for certifying organizations—a certifier of certifiers. **NOCA's** publications and annual meetings and seminars provide networking opportunities for certifying organizations to learn more about various certification topics, such as assessment methodologies, competency assurance research, different ways of designing certification programs, how governing boards are structured and managed, responsibilities of certifying entities, and legal implications of certification.

Contact: Bonnie Aubin; **NOCA**; 1101 Connecticut Ave., NW, Suite 700; Washington, DC 20036, bonnie aubin@dc.sba.com, www.noca.org

Clearinghouse for Licensure, Enforcement and Regulation (CLEAR)

CLEAR is an affiliate of the Council of State Governments, an organization that acts as a liaison among state, federal, and private sectors. **CLEAR's** mission is to provide resources necessary for ongoing and thorough communication of licensure and regulation issues among agencies, boards, legislators, and other groups interested in credentialing. The vehicles for carrying out its mission are an annual meeting, regional workshops, and publications—in particular the *Clear Exam Review*. Typical articles focus on assessment procedures, legal ramifications, use of technology in assessment, and the latest research in credentialing. In 1993, **CLEAR** and **NOCA** jointly published *Principles of Fairness: An Examining Guide for Credentialing Boards.*

Contact: Pam Brinegar; **CLEAR**; 3560 Iron Works Pike; P.O. Box 11910; Lexington, KY 40578-1910, pbrinegar@mis.net, www.clearhq.org

American National Standards Institute (ANSI)

ANSI is not a membership association. Its mission is to assist organizations, industries, and companies in developing standards, approve the standards set by other entities, accredit organizations that write standards, and evaluate standards for approval. Approved standards from **ANSI**-accredited organizations become "American National Standards" **ANSI** mainly has been involved in approving standards for products and services rather than standards for workers' skills. Nevertheless, **ANSI** documents and procedures cover important aspects of credentialing, whether it is of individuals, organizations, or industries.

Contact: **ANSI**; 11 West 42nd St.; New York, NY 10036, ansionline@ansi.org, www.ansi.org

Networking Groups

Networking among certification executives is extensive. Two informal certification networking groups meet regularly in Washington, D.C., and Chicago. The names and contacts for these groups are as follows:

Chicago Area Testing Organizations

Contact: Chris Reidy, American Dietetic Association Commission on Dietetic Registration, 216 West Jackson Boulevard, Chicago, IL 60606-6995 creidy@eatright.org, www.cdrnet.org

Metropolitan DC Certification Networking Group

Contact: Michael Martin, Commission for Certification in Geriatric Pharmacy, 1321 Duke Street, Alexandria, VA 22314, info@ccgp.org, www.ccgp.org

Accreditation Resources

New England Association of Schools and Colleges, Commission on Vocational and Technical Career Institutions (NEASC)

NEASC is one of two regional accreditation bodies that have a standing commission dedicated to both secondary and postsecondary vocational, technical, and career institutions. It has accredited 106 colleges and technology centers throughout New England.

As a matter of policy, each institution must have a technical advisory council for each occupation curriculum in the institution. These committees typically are made up of eight to ten representatives of business who can participate in curriculum development on an ongoing basis.

If the program is one typically requiring certification or licensure, the program must fulfill the minimum requirements to be eligible for their graduates to sit for the required examinations or to meet other requirements. The institution must provide evidence that a reasonable proportion of graduates become certified or licensed on graduation.

Contact: **NEASC**; 209 Burlington Road; Bedford, MA 01730-1433, kwillis@neasc.org, www.neasc.org

International Association for Continuing Education and Training (IACET)

IACET, formerly known as the Accrediting Council for Continuing Education and Training, was established in 1974 for the sole purpose of administering an accreditation function within the broadly defined function of continuing education and training. It is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education. Its roots have been in the higher education community, but the organization notes there is an increasing number of business-related associations that are becoming involved with this form of accreditation. Trade and professional associations, corporate training departments, labor union programs, private career schools, and public affairs and cultural societies are examples of organizations that can have their programs recognized by the organization. The programs that have been accredited provide training in over 1,000 locations, and more than 800,000 adults were served in 1992.

Contact: **IACET**; 1620 I Street NW, Suite 615, Washington, D.C. 20006, iacet@moinc.com, www.iacet.org

Computing Sciences Accreditation Board, Inc. (CSAB)

CSAB grants accreditation for four-year B.A. programs and is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education. **CSAB** policies note that it prefers to minimize the number of specially- designated programs and favors broad basic programs so that students can take advantage of several opportunities. It seeks to avoid applying minimum standards in a way that would discourage well-planned experimentation.

Contact: Patrick M. LaMalva; Executive Director; **CSAB**; 184 N. Street, Stamford, CT 06901; csab@csab.org , www.csab.org

American Dental Association, Commission on Dental Accreditation (ADA/CDA)

This commission is responsible for accrediting fourteen disciplines that range from the paraprofessional type of occupation, such as dental assisting, to advanced specialty education programs for dentists. The commission recognizes more than 1,300 educational institutions and professional programs and is recognized by the Department of Education.

Contact: **ADA/CDA,** 211 East Chicago Ave.; Chicago, IL 60611-2678; (312) 440-2500, www.ada.org

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Pennell, M.Y, J. R. Proffitt, and T D. Hatch. 1971. *Accreditation and certification in relation to allied health manpower.* Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare.

Bibliography

Despite the prevalence of certification in the fabric of the occupations and professions, there is no complete listing of all the certification programs and their directors; however, there are a number of key publications that have extensive lists of organizations, addresses, and contacts:

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Paré, Michael A. Ed.. 1999. *Certification and Accreditation Programs Directory, Second Edition.* Farmington Hills, MI: Gale Research.

Oryx Press. 1987. *Directory of selected national testing programs.* Phoenix, Ariz.: Oryx Press.

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Downs, Buck, Sr. Ed. 1999. *National Trade and Professional Associations.* New York: Columbia Books, Inc.

There are standards available to developers of credentialing programs that may assist them in developing high-quality and technically correct programs:

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National Public Service Accreditation Board. 1991. *Standards and procedures.* Washington, D.C.: NPSAB.

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