



## Time to Stop Thumbing our Noses at Certificates

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Curriculum-based certificates are getting a bad rap. They've been called the "step-child" of professional certification, the implication being that they are inferior. I do not agree with that assertion.

This perception seems to stem from their inability to meet the current certification industry standards that stipulate that certifying agencies should not *require* training programs linked to the certification examination. Indeed, at the core of a certificate program is its comprehensive training linked to its examination.

However, discounting certificates simply because they do not meet the current [ANSI](#) and [NCCA](#) accreditation standards is short-sighted. Let me clarify that I am NOT implying the standards are flawed. I am a strong supporter of the standards for both ANSI and NCCA accreditation. In fact I am a lead auditor for the ISO/IEC 17024 standards required for ANSI accreditation. I use both sets of standards as the basis for my audits of client certification programs. My point is that certificates are a distinct type of credentialing program warranting their own set of quality standards.

To clarify, curriculum-based certificates are NOT just courses that provide a paper certificate after completion. There are a lot of programs out there called "certificates" - that are not what I'm describing here. It's a term that's currently being used indiscriminately.

A quality curriculum-based certificate program typically includes these elements (and likely more; this list is starting point):

- It focuses on a specialized area within a field, not an entire field.
- Its content is identified through a job analysis.
- It includes comprehensive training on the identified content (knowledge and skills).
- It includes an assessment of identified content (knowledge and skill attainment).
- Its assessment is valid and reliable for the intended purpose, and systems are in place to monitor the performance of the assessment.

Here are the key differences between traditional certification and a curriculum-based model.

- Certification usually covers a broad body of knowledge - often an entire field. Certificates, in contrast, usually cover a focused or specialized body of knowledge within a field. For example, there wouldn't be a "certificate in nursing", or even a "certificate in pediatric nursing", but perhaps there would be a "certificate in pediatric trauma care."
- In certification the focus is on assessing *current* knowledge and skills. In a curriculum-based model, the focus is on first *training* individuals to achieve a certain knowledge and skill base and then *assessing* their attainment of it.
- Certification usually has eligibility and recertification requirements. Certificates don't, although sometimes the certificates are dated (like a diploma) to encourage (or require) participants to retake the program at specific intervals to stay current.
- Certification usually awards a title and initial designation (e.g., ASAE's "[Certified Association Executive](#)" and "CAE"). Certificates award a certificate (like a diploma) so that individuals can list the attainment on resumes or other similar documents (e.g., Earned Certificate of Training in Adult Weight Management, Commission on Dietetic Registration, 2005).

So, the decision whether to create a certification program or a curriculum-based certificate program should be based on the current state of the field and specialty area being investigated and the goals an organization is trying to achieve.

Consider this successful model. In 1990, the [American Dietetic Association](#) (ADA) had a strategic goal of better positioning their members in the expanding (tee hee) area of weight management. Had they been short-sighted, they could have decided to create a certification in weight management. That would have provided a form of recognition and visibility for their members. However, they recognized that training was needed to advance member skill in new treatment areas before they would be prepared to be positioned in the marketplace. They could have just created training programs, but that wouldn't have directly addressed the positioning element. Enter curriculum-based certification. The [Commission on Dietetic Registration](#) (CDR, the credentialing agency for the ADA) created such a program (they call it a certificate program to distinguish it from their traditional certification programs). While ADA's goal was to position members in the marketplace, CDR's primary goal for the certificate was to protect the health and welfare of the public — a compatible match and reasonable aim for the certificate program. The certificate was created in much the same way as traditional certification “ with a job analysis at the core. Yet, this job analysis formed the basis of not only a test content outline, but also a comprehensive curriculum. In short, participants are trained a specific curriculum, are tested for their attainment of it, and if successful earn the certificate. Five years into it, CDR has trained and issued thousands of certificates, and its popularity shows no signs of slowing. No one complains about the registration fee, despite it being almost twice the cost of the association's annual membership. Consistently, over 95% of participants indicate they would recommend the program to a colleague. Now, have the members been better positioned in the marketplace? Has the public been better served? No quantitative data on that yet, but all indications so far are quite positive.

This is a unique model in the association world, and it's one to watch. What role could a curriculum-based certificate have in advancing your members or the field your association represents?

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