



We've Decided to Create a Certificate Program. Where Do We Start?

Many organizations have created successful certificate programs. For example, the Commission on Dietetic Registration (CDR) offers a *Certificate of Training in Adult Weight Management* for registered dietitians. In its last session evaluation, 99% of participants said they would recommend the program to a colleague. CDR can't provide enough sessions to keep up with the demand. Why such a positive response? Maybe because over half of Americans are overweight! :-)

Actually, we feel that the success stems from the uniqueness of the certificate program from traditional conferences or seminars. In this certificate:

- A pre-test screens individuals so that only those who know the fundamentals well enough to actively participate in the workshop are permitted to attend.
- Unlike conferences and seminars that offer several unrelated topics without integration, the certificate program's sessions are comprehensive and logically sequenced. And at the end, case studies enable participants to integrate and apply what they have learned.
- A post-test determines what has been learned, and participants receive immediate acknowledgement of their accomplishment through a certificate.

So, how can you develop a successful program?

1. Be sure there is a market demand for the certificate.

No matter how great a program you develop, if the market doesn't value or need it, participation and your budget will reflect that. So be sure to investigate what the market wants and/or needs. How? Ideally, conduct a thorough needs assessment of your members. Other ways to get a quick pulse of the market include:

- Monitoring the environment for changes that require a new knowledge or skill set
- Checking what topics are being covered most heavily in recent industry publications
- Checking sales of your association's publications by topic
- Checking for trends in participation of topical educational events your association offers
- Checking recent conference evaluations for trends on what topics members are requesting more information on
- Monitor online discussions to see what professionals are talking about / seeking guidance on

2. Be clear on what you are offering.

Certification, accreditation, knowledge/skill-based certificates, and curriculum-based certificates are all types of credentialing programs. This article focuses on a curriculum-based certificate program, defined as follows:

A curriculum-based certificate is a comprehensive training program on a focused topic for which participants receive a certificate after completion of the coursework and successful demonstration of attaining the course learning objectives. Unlike certification, curriculum-based certificates *usually* do not have ongoing requirements, do not result in an initial designation, and cannot be revoked.

Not only do you need to be clear on what you are offering, you need to communicate effectively to your target audience what you are offering. It is almost a certainty that some members will mistakenly call your certificate a certification and they'll refer to getting certified after the course. Be prepared for this and be proactive to minimize the confusion as much as possible through well-thought out and frequent communications. Calling your program a "certificate of training" rather than simply a "certificate" might help. Also be clear that participants will NOT earn a professional designation.

3. Determine program goals and audience.

While it is tempting to jump into developing course content, to do so would be skipping an integral step. First, you must determine what the goals of the program are since they will guide you in all further decisions about the program. At minimum, your goals should answer the following questions:

- Who is the target audience of the certificate program?
- What is the value of the certificate program to this audience?
- What is the desired outcome of the certificate for participants?
- What is the desired outcome of the certificate for the association?

Here are a few examples:

- To provide a new skill set to members of the association in order to position them in a new or emerging area.
- To provide a member benefit.
- To advance a specialized skill of a segment of members.
- To generate \$10,000 net revenue for each certificate offering.

Although your first thought may be to make the target audience inclusive - for everyone - there are drawbacks to making the audience too large. Foremost, it can diminish the certificate's ability to adequately meet anyone's needs. It is better to meet a smaller group's needs well, than to only partially meet a large group's needs.

4. Develop the course curriculum.

While not essential, use of an advisory committee (also called an expert panel) made of up well-known professionals working in the area of the certificate is highly recommended. Not only will the advisory committee be best able to identify for you what the course curriculum should be, having their names associated also adds instant credibility thus marketability to the program. (Be sure to get testimonials from them for use in promotional materials!)

First, have the advisory group brainstorm and come to consensus on what is the appropriate scope of the certificate. Recall from our certificate definition that a certificate is a "comprehensive training program on a focused topic." A whole field is too broad to be covered adequately in a certificate program. For example, it would be impossible to develop a certificate on nursing, even pediatric nursing is too broad, but one on pediatric case management may be possible.

After the scope of the certificate has been determined, have the advisory committee identify the core competencies to be covered in the course. This is accomplished by conducting a job analysis. Although the term sounds daunting, a job analysis is simply a process for identifying what knowledge and skills are necessary to perform a particular "job." (Job used here refers generally to the content area of the certificate.)

In a job analysis:

1. A "job" is broken down into domains (the general responsibilities within the job)
2. Each domain is then broken down into competencies (the knowledge or skills needed to perform the job)

As an example, below is shown what could be partial results of a job analysis of leadership.

Leadership Domains: Customer Focus, Systems Thinking, Team Building, Emotional Intelligence, Relationship Building, Lifelong Learning

Competencies for Customer Focus: Earns customer trust and respect, Provides high quality products and services, Obtains customer information and uses it for design, evaluation, and improvement of services

Here's a simple and inexpensive way to conduct a job analysis.

1. Collect as much data as possible about the certificate content. Some readily available sources of data include:

- Job descriptions of the target audience
- Yours or other organization's certification test content outlines
- Seminal texts in the field
- Journal or magazine articles

2. Convene your advisory group (usually 6-12). Have them review the information collected and add to and refine it in order to develop the certificate domains and competencies. Depending on the complexity of the "job", this can take one to several days. Or, you may meet just once and follow-up with mailed iterative drafts asking for comments to be sent in for compilation.

3. Have a larger group of experts review and provide comments on the final draft.

Next, you will need to translate the competencies into course learning objectives. Learning objectives should complete the following statement:

At the end of the course, participants should be able to:

If you don't have appropriate expertise on staff, you may need to contract with consultants to assist you in conducting a job analysis and/or translating the competencies into learning objectives. These items are the foundation of a successful certificate program and must be developed with care and precision.

5. Select the delivery vehicle/s.

Certificate programs can be delivered in many different ways. Your program goals, target audience preferences or access, course learning objectives, and program budget will drive the delivery vehicle choice(s). Here are some options:

- Self-study modules (print, packaged audio/video/CD/DVD, on-line)
- Face to face workshops
- Instructor-led online courses
- On-line discussion boards or discussion lists
- Audio conferences
- Web conferences
- Quizzes, Pre-tests, and Post-tests

Many certificate programs are now using blended learning approaches - that is, using several delivery vehicles throughout the course. Here is the model the Commission on Dietetic Registration uses:

Mailed fundamentals self-study
On-line pre-test to qualify individuals for continuing the course
Face-to-face workshop
Online post-test to determine if attainment of course learning objectives is demonstrated
(Considering) On-line discussion lists to continue the dialogue after the course

6. Develop course content and assessments.

Armed with course learning objectives and chosen delivery methods, you are now ready to develop the course content. How that content is developed depends greatly upon the delivery method/s chosen so we'll not discuss that in detail here, except for a few suggestions and some explanation of assessment options.

You might want to consider hiring a subject matter expert (SME) to create the content for self-study modules. While a volunteer could be used, realize that your timelines will need to be much more generous. Faculty will likely also need to be paid since you will want to maintain ownership of the presentations they create. On that subject, material ownership should be clearly spelled out in contracts with SMES, faculty, and consultants.

Quizzes You can insert quizzes after each content module of the course - or in the case of on-line courses, quizzes can pop-up anywhere throughout the course. These types of quizzes are usually used as self-assessments to support participant learning rather than as graded "tests."

Pre-tests Pre-test come in at least three possible forms:

- A self-assessment covering the course learning objectives used only to gauge the knowledge-level of participants.
- The same questions as the post-test so that you can judge what the participants learned through the course.
- A test on a segment of learning objectives that are covered in pre-work completed prior to the rest of the certificate program. Often, participants who do not attain a passing score are not permitted to attend the remainder of the certificate program (but are refunded the registration fee minus an appropriate fee for the pre-work and pre-test).

Post-tests The most common way to assess attainment of course learning objectives is through a post-test. Since the learning objectives outline what the students or participants should know or be able to do after the course, then the post-test should assess their ability to meet those established objectives.

Above all, it is critical that the content and assessments developed are based on the learning objectives! Provide all faculty, SMEs, and consultants with the learning objectives and instruct them to develop their content based on them. If possible, have them reference on the scripts, modules, or assessments where they have addressed each learning objective. Then, you can do a double check to make sure all objectives are accurately and sufficiently covered. Writing assessments is both an art and a science. It's a good idea to have an expert train your SMEs or review the questions drafted.

That's the cliffs notes version on how to create a curriculum-based certificate program. Of course, along the way you will need to be promoting the program, pricing the program, and arranging logistics. Good luck!

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