

# DEFINING FEATURES OF QUALITY CERTIFICATION AND ASSESSMENT-BASED CERTIFICATE PROGRAMS (Draft)

Rev. 5.1

August 8, 2007

## Introduction

In January 2007, the National Organization for Competency Assurance (NOCA) Board of Directors established a Certificate Task Force to:

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

The Certificate Task Force is comprised of NOCA members and other key parties and relevant stakeholder groups.

Although there are a number of different types of certificate programs, each serving an important purpose, the work of the task force focuses specifically on *assessment-based* certificate programs, as these are most relevant to NOCA's mission to "promote excellence in competency assessment for practitioners in all occupations and professions." NOCA recognizes that quality assessment-based certificate programs, through the instruction and training they provide, may play a valuable role in helping individuals to attain occupational/professional competence and also have some functions in common with certification programs, namely, identifying and assessing requisite occupational/professional knowledge, skills, and competencies.

**Please take a moment to carefully review the following credentialing definitions, related to three distinct entities (Certification, Assessment-Based Certificate Program, and Course Leading to Certificate of Attendance or Participation) as they are critical to understanding the remainder of this document.**

**Certification** is a voluntary process by which individuals are assessed against predetermined standards for knowledge/skills/competencies and granted a time-limited credential. The primary purpose of certification is assessment and the assessment process is independent of a specific course of study or any education/course/curriculum provider.

An **assessment-based certificate program** is a relatively short, non-degree granting program that provides instruction and training to aid participants in acquiring knowledge/skills/competencies and designates that participants have passed an end-of-program assessment derived from the learning/course objectives. Although assessment is an integral part of the certificate program, the primary purpose of the program is to provide instruction and training.

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**A course leading to a certificate of attendance or participation** is issued to individuals who attend a program of instruction and/or training. Successful completion of an end-of-program assessment is NOT a requirement for obtaining the certificate.

An initial outcome of the task force's work is the following draft document that describes the defining features of quality certification and assessment-based certificate programs. NOCA is inviting its members and other key parties and relevant stakeholder groups to provide input on this document.

Your participation in this review is important to ensuring that the final document represents a concise and accurate definition of both certification and assessment-based certificate programs and the characteristics that are needed to ensure the delivery of credible, quality programs.

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Feature	Certification	Assessment-Based Certificate Program <sup>1</sup>
<p><b>Purpose</b></p>	<p>The primary purpose of certification is assessment; specifically, the evaluation of mastery of knowledge/skills/competencies related to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a profession,</li> <li>• an occupation,</li> <li>• a process,</li> <li>• support of a product, or</li> <li>• provision of a service.</li> </ul> <p>Other important purposes of certification are to measure or enhance continued competency through recertification or renewal requirements and to publicly recognize an individual's knowledge/skills/competencies by granting the individual the right to use a certification mark.</p> <p>Certification provides a process for verifying knowledge/skills/competencies that is independent of a specific course of study or any education/course/curriculum provider.</p>	<p>The primary purpose of an assessment-based certificate program is to provide instruction and training; specifically, education/courses/curricula/training whereby participants can acquire knowledge/skills/competencies related to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a profession,</li> <li>• an occupation,</li> <li>• a process,</li> <li>• support of a product, or</li> <li>• provision of a service.</li> </ul> <p>Assessment-based certificate programs designate that participants have completed education/coursework/curricula/training that is tied to specific learning or course objectives and passed an end-of-program assessment derived from those objectives.</p> <p>The program may include remediation activities to address relative weaknesses or gaps in participants' knowledge/skills/competencies.</p>

<sup>1</sup> Assessment-based certificate programs are distinct from a course leading to certificates of attendance/participation in that they require successful completion of an end-of-program assessment to confirm accomplishment of the learning objectives.

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Feature	Certification	Assessment-Based Certificate Program <sup>1</sup>
<b>Scope</b>	<p>Certification may cover a broad or narrow set of knowledge/skills/competencies required to competently practice a profession, fulfill an occupational role, complete a process, support a product, or provide a service. The knowledge/skills/competencies assessed must be identified through a formal job/practice analysis or role delineation study.</p>	<p>Assessment-based certificate programs typically cover a relatively narrow set of knowledge/skills/competencies associated with competent practice of a profession, fulfillment of an occupational role, completion of a process, support of a product, provision of a service or fulfillment of continuing education requirements. The knowledge/skills/competencies covered are limited to those presented in the required education/courses/curricula/training and are reflected in the learning objectives. The knowledge/skills/competencies assessed may be identified through a formal study (e.g., job/task analysis).</p>
<b>Provider</b>	<p>Providers of certification programs may include: professional certification or membership organizations or for-profit or not-for profit entities.</p> <p>The provider conducts the certification program independently of any educational programs. The provider is not responsible for accreditation<sup>2</sup> of educational or training programs or courses of study leading to the certification, nor should it require completion of its own educational programs (if such programs are offered).</p>	<p>Providers of assessment-based certificate programs may include: professional certification or membership organizations, for-profit or not-for profit entities, educational institutions, or individuals.</p> <p>The provider conducts or sponsors the education/courses/curriculum/training that is required for the certificate.</p>

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<sup>2</sup> **Accreditation** is the voluntary process by which a nongovernmental agency grants a time-limited recognition to a program provided by an institution, organization, business, or other entity after verifying that the program has met predetermined and standardized criteria.

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Feature	Certification	Assessment-Based Certificate Program
<b>Governance</b>	<p>A governing body with representation from relevant stakeholders<sup>3</sup> 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.</p> <p>Potential candidates, candidates and certificants should be provided with the opportunity to appeal decisions made by the governing body regarding their status.</p>	<p>A governing body with oversight responsibilities for the assessment-based certificate program is not required; however, the program does function with input from subject-matter experts, who assist in development and evaluation of the program.</p>
<b>Role of Education/ Training/ Experience</b>	<p>Eligibility requirements may include completion of specific education/courses/curricula/training or relevant experience.</p> <p>The <u>required</u> education/courses/curricula/training are <i>not</i> offered solely by the certification program provider.</p>	<p>The program requires completion of specific education/courses/curricula/training offered or sponsored by the certificate provider. There may be education/training prerequisites in addition to the education/courses/curricula/training required to attain the certificate.</p>

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<sup>3</sup> 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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Rev. 5.1

August 8, 2007

Feature	Certification	Assessment-Based Certificate Program
<b>Content</b>	<p>The content of the assessment leading to certification must be identified and periodically updated through a formal study (e.g., job/practice analysis, role delineation) and in accordance with accepted psychometric practices. It is primarily defined by job incumbents and/or employers through the formal job/practice analysis or role delineation process.</p> <p>The content of the assessment leading to certification primarily emphasizes professional/occupational practice and competencies, but may also include theory, principles, and concepts.</p>	<p>The content of the assessment-based certificate program may be identified and updated through a formal study (e.g., job/task analysis) and should be developed in accordance with accepted instructional design practices. It is defined by job incumbents, employers, trainers, academicians, and other subject matter experts through their involvement in the development and/or review processes. Analyses of learner needs also inform the selection of content for the program.</p> <p>The content may focus on professional/occupational practice and competencies and/or theory, principles, concepts and their application, including the hands-on demonstration of skills.</p>

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Feature	Certification	Assessment-Based Certificate Program
<p><b>Assessment</b></p>	<p>The purpose of the assessment process is to evaluate mastery of knowledge/skills associated with competency and any form of psychometrically sound assessments may be utilized for this purpose.</p> <p>In certification, the assessment takes place <i>after</i> the candidate has had the opportunity to acquire the targeted knowledge/skills/competencies.</p> <p>The assessment is administered in a standardized manner in a secure, proctored environment.</p> <p>The assessment process is often considered to be “high stakes” because it may be required for regulatory purposes or may have a significant impact on (or may be required for) hiring, promotion and other key employment-related outcomes (e.g., salary, hospital privileging).</p>	<p>The purpose of the assessment process is to evaluate understanding of the required content and accomplishment of the learning objectives. Any form of assessment may be utilized for this purpose.</p> <p>In assessment-based certificate programs, summative and/or formative assessment may take place on one or more occasions throughout the learning process. Assessment may include a diagnostic component (i.e., pretest) and may be remedial (i.e., focus on correction or improvement).</p> <p>Administration of the assessment in a standardized manner or secure, proctored environment is <i>not</i> required.</p> <p>The assessment process is not usually considered to be “high stakes” because it generally is not required for regulatory purposes and does not have a significant impact on (or is not required for) hiring, promotion and other key employment-related outcomes (e.g., salary, hospital privileging).</p> <p><b>NOTE:</b> If a certificate program is required for regulatory purposes or has a significant impact on (or is required for) hiring, promotion and other key employment-related outcomes (e.g., salary, hospital privileging), the assessment(s) should be developed and scored in a psychometrically sound and legally defensible manner and administered in a secure, proctored environment.</p>

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<p><b>Analysis of Assessments</b></p>	<p>The certification assessment(s) undergo regular psychometric analyses, which are used to evaluate and improve the psychometric characteristics of the assessment(s).</p>	<p>Psychometric analyses may not be conducted to evaluate and improve the psychometric characteristics of the assessment(s).</p> <p>At a minimum a periodic review by subject matter experts should be conducted to verify the assessment tool is appropriately measuring against the learning objectives.</p> <p><b>NOTE:</b> If a certificate program is required for regulatory purposes or has a significant impact on (or is required for) hiring, promotion and other key employment-related outcomes (e.g., salary, hospital privileging), the assessment(s) should be developed, administered, and scored in a psychometrically sound and legally defensible manner.</p>
<p><b>Standard Setting</b></p>	<p>The passing standard for the assessment is established using a psychometrically sound, criterion-referenced method in which trained stakeholders participate.</p> <p>The governing body for the certification program retains authority for setting /approving the passing standard.</p> <p>Statistical equating (or other accepted psychometric methods) is employed to ensure that the passing standard remains consistent across various forms of the assessment.</p>	<p>The passing standard for the summative assessment focuses on demonstration of the learning objectives and is established, with the input of subject-matter experts, in advance of administration of the assessment(s). Psychometric principles may guide the standard-setting process. Typically, the provider of the certificate retains authority for setting the passing standard.</p> <p><b>NOTE:</b> If a certificate program is required for regulatory purposes or has a significant impact on (or is required for) hiring, promotion and other key employment-related outcomes (e.g., salary, hospital privileging), the assessment(s) should be developed, administered, and scored in a psychometrically sound and legally defensible manner.</p>
<p><b>Credential Maintenance</b></p>	<p>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).</p> <p>To maintain the credential, a certificant is required to engage in specified activities designed to measure or enhance continued competency. Certificants are subject to disciplinary policy and the credential can be revoked by the</p>	<p>An assessment-based certificate is generally not time limited (i.e., it typically lapses or expires at the end of a predetermined time period).</p> <p>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/coursework/training to update the certificate.</p>



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	governing body.	
Feature	Certification	Assessment-Based Certificate Program
<b>Primary Intent</b>	Certification program providers publish an explicit statement regarding the <i>primary</i> intent 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, stakeholders, and other entities as to what inferences can properly be made regarding those who hold the certification. Furthermore, these inferences should be appropriate to the stated intent of the certification and the type of assessments, scoring procedures, and standard-setting methodologies utilized.	Certificate program providers publish an explicit statement regarding the <i>primary</i> intent of the certificate program (e.g., to assist individuals in acquiring a specified set of knowledge/skills/competencies). They also provide guidance to participants, certificate holders, stakeholders, and other entities as to what inferences can properly be made regarding those who hold the certificate. Furthermore, these inferences should be appropriate to the stated intent of the certificate and the type of assessments, scoring procedures, and standard-setting methodologies utilized. <sup>4</sup>
<b>Identification of Individuals Who Have Completed Program</b>	Certificants are “Certified in XYZ” or “Certified XYZ Professionals” ( <i>NOTE: These terms are illustrative; they are not meant to be inclusive or prescriptive</i> ).  Certificants are awarded letters for use after their names to signify that they have obtained and maintained the credential.	Certificate holders have a “Certificate in XYZ” ; ( <i>NOTE: This term is illustrative; it is not meant to be inclusive or prescriptive</i> ).  Certificate holders are <i>not</i> awarded letters for use after their names.

<sup>4</sup> If an assessment-based certificate program is required for regulatory purposes or has a significant impact on (or is required for) hiring, promotion and other key employment-related outcomes (e.g., salary, hospital privileging), the assessment(s) should be developed, administered, and scored in a psychometrically sound and legally defensible manner.

NOTE: Further detail regarding the features of quality professional certification programs can be found in the National Commission for Certifying Agencies’ *Standards for the Accreditation of Certification Programs*. These standards can be downloaded from the NOCA website by going to [www.noca.org](http://www.noca.org).