

# Association Certification: Proven Pathway to Professionalism

*By Richard C. Daffeson*

**C**ertification has become well-established in hundreds of professions over many decades throughout the United States. The earliest of these designations were created during the 1930s and 1940s, and they represented traditional and readily identifiable careers such as those in architecture and engineering.

Since that time, professional associations have considered and developed numerous certification categories for practitioners in their respective fields, and in recent years, the creation of designations has expanded dramatically, according to the National Certification Commission (see Table 1). For example, four new categories were introduced by the American Correctional Association for its Correctional Certification Program between 1999 and 2002: certified corrections executive (CCE), certified corrections manager (CCM), certified corrections supervisor (CCS) and certified corrections officer (CCO).

**Table 1. Category Introduction**

Decade	Percentage of Current Total
2000s	—
1990s	28%
1980s	25%
1970s	19%
1960s	12%
1950s	7%

Professional associations, such as ACA, sponsor certification as a comprehensive program of voluntary recognition based on detailed evaluations of knowledge and experience in a field at various levels or sequential categories within selected careers. There are also benefits associated with certification (see Table 2), as indicated in a recent survey by the National Certification Commission. Participation in certification is available to any interested practitioners who are either members or nonmembers of an association.

**Table 2. Certification Benefits**

Benefits	Percentage of All Respondents
Recognize professionalism	91%
Use of designation initials	89%
Advance knowledge	80%
Advance experience	80%
Serve as degree certificate	75%
Promote abilities to public	65%
Offer continuing education	55%
Qualify for employment	50%
Provide self-regulation	10%

Early certification programs often offered one category. For example, the American Institute of Architects initially only presented its standard AIA designation. However, the National Certification Commission reports that more recently, multiple categories have been developed by most associations (see Table 3). Certification programs have expanded available categories to include entry level, standard, advanced and specializations. These categories usually are sequential pathways for achievement as practitioners progress and continue through their entire career in a particular field.

**Table 3. Multiple Categories**

Number	1999	2001	2003
1 category	40%	35%	30%
2 categories	30%	35%	20%
3 categories	18%	15%	20%
4 or more	12%	15%	30%

There has been a dual trend over recent years of more associations offering certification, and of those that do, multiple categories have been developed. ACA serves as an excellent example of this trend with four categories available, and more currently under development.

## Implementing Certification

Key individuals involved with any certification program will include members of the certification committee, which develops and approves policies and procedures, and department staff, who are responsible for presenting and implementing components and requirements.

The committee is extremely important when a certification program is developing because the committee selects components that will be included and determines the related requirements to achieve certification. With committee approval (and often that of the national board), staff can proceed with their functions. Staff also provide frequent progress reports to the committee, and may seek its advice on certain applications and candidate appeals.

## Similarities Among Certification Programs

Regardless of the certification program, there are many similarities among them in terms of components and procedures, although requirements will vary depending on the career and category. Nearly all certification programs have standard components that cover formal education, continuing education, practical experience, the written examination and certain documentation (e.g., letters of reference, supervisory references, work samples or reports, and other licenses or certifications).

These are items candidates must provide and satisfactorily comply with in order to be approved, and within each component there are threshold requirements. For example, certification of a medical practitioner would probably necessitate a doctorate in medicine as the minimum educational requirement and terminal degree for practice. Other fields would not be as stringent, and many programs offer a sliding scale where experience can be substituted for education. For example, a candidate with an undergraduate degree might qualify with two years of experience, while someone with an associate's degree might need four years.

There are also similarities regarding systematic procedures in that all candidates must obtain, complete and submit an application, which is subject to review and approval before they proceed.

Within this process, more than 80 percent of certification programs have an examination. Of the programs that offer exams, about 90 percent use a written format, while other approaches could include practical tests (e.g., culi-

nary arts and automobile mechanics) and oral reviews (e.g., bank examiners and trial lawyers).

The vast majority of written exams are in a multiple-choice format, and the number of questions varies from 100 to 200, depending on the designation. For example, ACA certification exams consist of 200 questions and use a combination of multiple choice (90 percent) and true/false (10 percent), which candidates have four hours to complete.

Study materials and training are either provided or recommended by the sponsoring association to assist candidates with exam preparation. ACA candidates are fortunate since there are exceptional materials to prepare them for the exams.

Regardless of the exam formats, passing scores generally range from 70 percent to 80 percent depending on the requirements established by the certification committee of the sponsoring association. For its current categories, ACA uses 70 percent as the passing score.

## Acknowledging Certification

Once candidates have successfully completed all stages of the review process (i.e., application, documentation, verification and examination) and finally are approved, symbolic and meaningful recognition items are provided by the sponsoring association. Items often include plaques, pins, patches, badges, cards and signs. These will depend on the nature of the profession. For example, in automotive certification, station signage and uniform patches are useful.

Associations also provide acknowledgment letters, statements of use for letter designations, codes of ethics and press releases. Occasionally, some associations have recognition ceremonies for approved candidates at annual conferences, publish directories of those with certification, and send congratulatory letters to employers and colleges. In addition, some have demonstrations of skills by candidates at conferences, as is often done in culinary arts where products can be displayed.

Association certification is part of a larger framework of professional development and a national trend to recognize more and more careers. ACA is clearly at the forefront of associations engaged in this endeavor and is making significant progress with the advances of its Correctional Certification Program. ACA serves as an excellent example with its commitment and capability to recognize dedicated professionals in this time-honored field of corrections.

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