

## **Corrections Certification: First Steps toward Professionalism**

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Ask any practitioner what corrections has in common with doctors and lawyers, and those willing to venture a guess are likely to cite an above-average involvement with liability lawsuits. But there is something considerably more positive that corrections now shares with these established professions—that is, a standardized process for credentialing its personnel. Just as qualified corrections facilities are able to seek accreditation status, qualified staff likewise now has an opportunity to achieve nationally recognized certification.

Although the accreditation process has existed for over two decades, a program for certifying correctional staff—from line officers to executive leaders—began less than two years ago with the establishment of ACA's national Commission on Correctional Certification. Comparing organizational accreditation with personnel certification reveals differences as well as similarities.

### **Accreditation and Certification Comparisons**

At the most fundamental level, these processes each maintain a different focus. Whereas accreditation assesses the manner in which facilities are continuously improved, services are provided, and programs are implemented, certification is directed toward the capabilities of personnel operating the facilities, providing the services, and staffing the programs. By definition, accreditation is therefore a broader, more comprehensive process. It incorporates numerous measuring points and embraces virtually every facet of the organization being assessed. On the other hand, certification is less generalized. It involves review of a person's credentials and capabilities as they relate to that individual's current job functions.

There are a few additional distinctions. The Commission on Accreditation for Corrections (CAC) is a private, non-profit entity that began in 1978 and now administers a national program for accrediting all components of adult and juvenile corrections. As of January, 2001, there were 1,185 institutions and programs throughout the country that have earned CAC accreditation. Certification is also national in scope; however, it does not have a lengthy history—having been initiated some 20 years later, in 1999. As a result, certification is still an emerging process. While thousands of institutional accreditation audits have been conducted during the past 20 years, certification is, relatively speaking, still in its infancy, with just three certification exams having been administered to 14 candidates (as of March, 2001). Additional applications for certification have been received from more than 60 individuals representing 17 states, plus the District of Columbia, the Federal Bureau of Prisons, and Puerto Rico.

In many respects, however, there may be more inherent similarities than differences between these two processes. Despite a number of distinctions in operational practices, both appear to share a degree of conceptual consistency. For example, the purpose of accreditation is to promote improvement in the management of correctional agencies by applying relevant standards to a voluntary external review process (ACA, 1999). Likewise, the purpose of a certification program is to uphold standards for competent practice (NOCA, 2000). One of the objectives of certification is to encourage high performance standards among correctional personnel (*Manual*, 2000). As accreditation does for facilities, certification provides an

opportunity for staff to be recognized as qualified correctional practitioners (*Manual*, 2000). In that regard, some parallels can also be drawn between certification and professionalism.

### **Seeking Professionalism through Certification**

As with all occupations that maintain self-imposed standards, the impetus for establishing a certification program has been ACA's desire to enhance professionalism in the field of corrections. Few would argue against that commendable goal, and many have vocally supported professional recognition for correctional staff. But in corrections, the term "professionalism" has often been enthusiastically embraced without much thought given to what is actually involved in achieving such status (Stinchcomb, 2000: 2). Obtaining professional recognition requires much more than emotional debate concerning the merits of individuals, or the importance of their work:

"Professionalism cannot simply be issued like a uniform or a badge. It is also beyond the power of any organization—whether a local department, a state [or federal] system, or the American Correctional Association—to issue an edict 'declaring' that correctional officers are professionals. While such action might be satisfying to the officers themselves, it would be, at best, a meaningless endeavor, and at worst, harmful—similar to obtaining a college degree through an uncertified 'diploma mill'" (Stinchcomb, 1986: 16).

As has been noted with regard to policing, claims of professional status in corrections are more often "an assertion of what ought to be done, rather than a statement of actual achievement" (Walker, 1977: 167).

Among the challenges inevitably confronted when developing a certification process is distinguishing a profession from an occupation. While a complicated issue to address in any discipline, it is perhaps even murkier in the justice system. In both law enforcement and corrections, professionalism has more often been equated with technical competence and organizational efficiency than with the individualistic and altruistic principles associated with such established professions as medicine and law (Stinchcomb, 2000: 4). In a speech still relevant today, former Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis described the elements of professionalism:

"First, a profession is an occupation for which the necessary preliminary training is intellectual in character, involving knowledge and to some extent learning as distinguished from mere skill; second, it is an occupation which is pursued largely for others and not merely for one's self; third, it is an occupation in which the amount of financial return is not the accepted measure of success." (cited in Bopp, 1977)

With regard to these three criteria of professionalism, corrections long ago (and some would say, unfortunately) achieved point three. However, corrections does not stand alone in that regard: "There are any number of professions—from teaching to nursing or social work—that have traditionally not been well-compensated" (Stinchcomb and Fox, 1999: 569). With respect to Justice Brandeis' second point, most correctional staff, at least initially, enter the field with some concern for helping others—although the realities of "life in the trenches" over the years, often wears down their enthusiasm.

It is in the area of Brandeis' first point—"the necessary preliminary training is intellectual in character, involving knowledge and to some extent learning as distinguished from

mere skill”—where less progress has occurred in the corrections field. (See, for example, Robinson, Porporino, and Simourd, 1997.) This does not mean that there is not a proper place for skill-related job preparation in corrections, or that a certification program can single-handedly upgrade such preparation from skill-based job training to knowledge-based intellectual standards. Additionally, like its accreditation counterpart, standards established by the corrections Certification Commission are designed to be acceptable—not optimal, (although there is nothing to prevent states or localities from further upgrading minimum requirements). Nevertheless, the Commission’s standards do represent a significant step toward embracing the type of intellectual principles that are characteristic of established professions.

### **The Corrections Certification Process**

Neither corrections’ officers nor executives—or, for that matter, any personnel occupying the ranks in-between— have an exclusive interest in professional certification. Recognizing this, the Commission on Correctional Certification established four categories within which personnel can seek certification status:

***Certified Correctional Executive (CCE)***: Those at the highest organizational level who oversee development and implementation of policies and procedures. Requires a college degree or equivalent.

***Certified Correctional Manager (CCM)***: Those who manage major units or programs, have authority over supervisory staff, and may contribute to, but primarily are responsible for the implementation of, agency policies and procedures. Requires an associate degree or equivalent.

***Certified Correctional Supervisor (CCS)***: Those who work with both staff and offenders, implement agency procedures, and supervise as well as evaluate personnel. Requires an associate degree or equivalent.

***Certified Correctional Officer (CCO)***: Line personnel who work directly with offenders. Requires a high school diploma or equivalent.

In order to become certified in one of these categories, an applicant must:

- Establish his or her qualifications as a member of the group representing the applicant’s current position. This includes documenting: educational credentials, number of years of full-time corrections experience, time in current position, and compliance with ACA’s *Code of Ethics*.
- Pass a 200 item, multiple-choice examination based on material from relevant resource publications. These source materials (identified for each certification category), contain information that, in the judgment of the Certification Commission, best matches descriptions developed by the National Institute of Corrections for the job tasks and related competencies associated with that position.<sup>1</sup> (See National Institute of Corrections, 1988, 1989, and 1992.)

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<sup>1</sup>NIC used a process known as DACUM, (Developing A Curriculum), to identify these job tasks, which are equally relevant as the foundation for preparing a certification exam.

After a review of submitted documentation, applicants who meet the established qualification standards enter into “candidacy status.” A candidate has two years to take and pass a certification examination. Those who successfully pass the exam become Certified Correctional Professionals (in one of the above-listed specific categories) for the next three years. Maintaining that status involves becoming re-certified; i.e., holding a position within the category for which one was certified and obtaining a specified number of continuing education contact hours—much like the re-certification requirements in such fields as teaching and nursing.

### **Developmental Highlights**

An undertaking of this magnitude obviously does not emerge overnight, and the present process was no exception. The concept originated with ACA staff in early 1995<sup>2</sup>. During the next three years, several models for certification programs in other fields were studied. Following conversations with a number of associations that had already developed similar programs, an action plan was devised.

With the installation of Richard Stalder as ACA’s president in August 1998, the plan found a strong advocate committed to making it become a reality—in his words, “to do for staff what accreditation has done for facilities.” At the 1999 Winter Conference, ACA’s Board of Directors approved the concept and President Stalder officially announced the Certification Program.

Implementation details were delegated to Robert Levinson of ACA’s staff, working in concert with Jack Greene, and in conjunction with a outside contractual consultant.<sup>3</sup> Drafts were prepared outlining the overall program design, application procedures were established, marketing brochures were composed, and a management information tracking system was constructed.

By the fall of 1999, enough of the infrastructure was in place to begin appointing the first certification commissioners—their inaugural meeting was conducted in March 2000 (see insert box). Initially, the Commissioners’ responsibilities were devoted largely to assisting staff with development of the first four examinations. Subsequently, the role of the Certification Commission became guiding and fine-tuning the overall process and its related policies. The Commission also handles any appeals from applicants or candidates.

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<sup>2</sup>ACA staff spearheading early developmental efforts were William Taylor and John (Jack) Greene, under the direction of James Gondles.

<sup>3</sup>Richard Jaffeson has provided consultation/technical assistance, primarily in the area of item writing. His experience assisting many other organizations in developing similar certification programs has been a valuable resource.

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As is apparent from the positions held by its members, a concerted effort has been made to ensure that the members on Commission on Correctional Certification reflected diverse correctional backgrounds, including both academicians and practitioners. Ultimately, it is projected that the Certification Commission, (like the accreditation commissioners), will be elected by the ACA membership and drawn primarily from the population of certified correctional personnel.

Certification officially began in January 2000 when the first application was accepted—from Kelley D. Ward, CCE, Warden of the David Wade Correctional Institution in Louisiana. Since most of the initial applications came primarily from those holding upper-level executive positions, emphasis was placed on finalizing the CCE exam. As a result, the CCE exam was administered for the first time in August 2000. Eight persons signed up to take the exam, and seven individuals were awarded their CCE designation at that session. William W. Sondervan, Ed.D., CCE was the first State Department of Corrections Commissioner to take and pass the CCE exam and Sharon E. Detter, Director of Administration, ComCorr, Inc., Colorado Springs, Colorado, became the first female CCE.

With applications also being received from correctional managers, the CCM exam became the next priority, and it debuted at ACA's 2001 Winter Conference in Nashville, Tennessee. Both the CCO and CCS exams will follow close on its heels. Upon the completion of these four core examinations, plans call for subsequent exams on specialized job categories, depending on demand; for example, probation personnel, independent trainers, consultants, etc.

Feedback from successful candidates indicates that while the exams are challenging, they are neither overwhelmingly complex nor overly simplistic. As of January, 2001, 86% of those taking the examinations have passed. Successful candidates report that prior experience and education are helpful; however, studying the resource materials is equally essential.

### **The Future of Correctional Professionalism**

Those living in the midst of monumental change are often the least likely to appreciate its significance. Only in retrospect does the impact of progress become apparent. Advancement toward the goal of correctional certification has undeniably been made during the past two years. A coherent process has emerged. A Commission on Correctional Certification has been appointed. Procedures have been established for reviewing applications, identifying study resources, developing exams, and tracking applicants/candidates as their paperwork moves through the system. Exams have been administered. Candidates have been certified. Re-certification procedures have been drafted. Clearly, the first steps have been taken on the long road toward true professionalism.

While corrections may still be some distance away from the esteem enjoyed by law or medicine, it is certainly an improvement to have something in common with those prestigious fields beyond involvement in liability lawsuits.

The major question remaining, however, is whether the field itself will embrace this approach--will corrections demonstrate a desire to upgrade its public image and its professional stature? It is one thing for a handful of administrators to take the lead by becoming certified. It is quite another to attract a broad-based groundswell of support

sufficient to make a significant impact on the future. After all, one of the major hallmarks of established professions is their universal compliance with a self-imposed credentialing process.

While certification itself may not be sufficient to achieve professionalization, it is certainly a necessary ingredient. But unless it is comprehensively embraced, corrections are likely to remain consigned to the status of an unregulated occupation rather than an emerging profession. If nothing else, the existence of a certification process will determine the extent to which corrections intends not merely to “talk the talk,” but to actually “walk the walk” of professionalism.

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