National Commission for Certifying Agencies

Standards for the
Accreditation of Certification Programs

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INTRODUCTION

In 1977, a Congressional mandate under President Jimmy Carter called for the creation of the National Commission for Health Certifying Agencies (NCHCA). Federally funded by a grant from the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (now the Department of Health and Human Services), NCHCA was established to develop standards for quality certification programs in the allied health fields and to accredit programs that met those standards.

In 1987, NCHCA was restructured and expanded to include accreditation of certification programs for all professions. As part of the restructure, NCHCA became the National Organization for Competency Assurance (NOCA) under which National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA) was formed. NOCA was structured as a membership association for certification organizations providing technical and educational services concerning certification practices. NCCA was structured as the accreditation body, developing accreditation standards and granting accreditation to certification programs that met these standards.

In 2009, the NOCA Board of Directors moved to change to a new name and became the Institute for Credentialing Excellence (ICE). NCCA's structure and role remained the same as the certification program accreditation body of ICE.

> Accreditation is both a process and a status. The NCCA's accreditation process uses peer review to evaluate a certification program's compliance with these standards, recognizes programs which demonstrate compliance, and serves as a resource on certification quality. NCCA *Standards* address the structure and governance of the certifying agency, the characteristics of the certification program, the information required to be available to applicants, certificants, and the public, and the recertification initiatives of the certifying agency. The NCCA's *Standards for the Accreditation of Certification Programs* used as a foundation the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*, promulgated by the American Psychological Association, American Educational Research Association, and the National Council on Measurement in Education. The guidelines of the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission were used as a foundation also.

As a status, NCCA's accreditation recognizes and provides public notification that the certifying program is committed to self-study and external review by one's peers, meets *Standards*, and seeks continuous improvement to maintain the quality of examination and certification of its constituent professionals. Upon achieving accreditation, it is essential that the certifying program embrace transparency and accountability to its stakeholders, certificants, and public through communications that are publicly available and readily accessible.

PRIOR REVISIONS OF *STANDARDS*

Since the 1970s when the *Standards* were first issued, NCCA has observed fundamental changes in the nature, scope, and importance of certification:

- First, the certification community has significantly expanded to include a broader diversity of occupational and professional credentials offered by non-profit organizations, for-profit entities, governmental agencies, and industries.
- Second, it is increasingly common for an organization to offer multiple certification programs.
- Third, the certification community has expanded internationally.

- Fourth, the certification and testing communities use computer technology to develop examination items and new examination formats, administer the examinations, and score and scale them with new methodologies.
- Fifth, an increasing number of certification programs are recognized by state and provincial regulatory authorities, a practice that expands the traditional definition of certification.
- Sixth, increased interest by professions for greater ease of mobility across jurisdictions, and greater access by the public for the services provided by the professions.

Upholding its mandate to serve and protect the public and stakeholders by maintaining accreditation standards for certification programs and to address fundamental changes in certification, NCCA implemented continuous improvement processes to review and revise its accreditation *Standards*. In 1997, NCCA initiated efforts to revise the accreditation *Standards*. After the proposed *Standards* were made available for public comment, the revised *Standards* were presented in 2002 to the organizations whose programs were accredited by the NCCA for ratification and approval.

CURRENT REVISION OF *STANDARDS*

As part of its continuous process of quality improvement, NCCA initiated another review and update of the *Standards* in 2013. A Steering Committee and three Task Forces were established for this purpose. In addition to determining that the *Standards* retained their currency and relevance, another purpose was to add clarity, particularly as change in the certification industry has created greater complexity. As a result, several standards were added or expanded and require additional evidence to demonstrate compliance. These additions reflect practices, policies, and procedures that accredited programs should have had in place previously and therefore, are **not** intended to increase the difficulty of attaining accreditation. Rather, by adding clarity, NCCA anticipates that organizations will better understand expectations of certification program quality.

The proposed *Standards* were submitted for public comment On September 6, 2014. The *Standards* were presented to the NCCA accredited agencies for vote on October 24, 2014 and approved on November 26, 2014.

The revised *Standards* retain their focus on certification programs and continue to be organized into five sections: (1) Purpose, Governance, and Resources, (2) Responsibilities to Stakeholders, (3) Assessment Instruments, (4) Recertification, and (5) Maintaining Accreditation.

To earn or maintain accreditation by NCCA, the certification program must meet *each* Standard and provide evidence of compliance through the submission of required documentation. Accompanying each Standard are **Essential Elements**, which are directly related to the Standard and specify what a certification program must do to fulfill requirements of the Standard.

The Essential Elements are accompanied by **Commentary***.* The Commentary sections clarify terms, provide examples of practice that help explain a Standard, or offer suggestions regarding evidence that may be provided to demonstrate compliance. NCCA reserves the right to revise the Commentary sections to

provide further clarity and guidance as might be needed. A **Glossary** of terms has been updated to define and describe terms within the document with the related purpose of enhancing clarity.

The 2013-2014 revision process was guided by the following tenets:

1. The *Standards* must embody the fundamentals required for protection of the public.

2. Many different types of credentialing programs will seek NCCA accreditation. The *Standards* and the terminology used must be adaptable to a wide variety of programs in order to achieve NCCA's public service mission.

3. The *Standards* must present requirements that are still valuable and relevant to the mission of NCCA accreditation.

4. The documentation required for accreditation must be explicit and minimize redundancy and repetition.

The *Standards* must be consistent, relevant, and distinctive, and reflect current practice.

Standard 1: Purpose

The purpose of the certification program must be to recognize each individual who meets established criteria. These criteria must uphold standards for practice in a profession, occupation, role, or specialty area.

Essential Elements:

A. The certification program must identify the population(s) being certified.

B. The certification program must make publicly available the purpose of the certification and the designation or mark issued to those certified. The certification program must provide the rationale for the appropriateness of its requirements. If the program does not issue a designation, a reasonable explanation must be provided.

Commentary:

1. Certification can be offered for a specific profession, occupation, role, or specialty area across multiple disciplines. The program should specify the audience(s) it is targeting for certification as well as the scope and purpose of the certification program. The scope should identify the level of experience for the targeted practitioner.

2. Suggested evidence to document that the Standard has been met includes a mission statement, bylaws, candidate handbook, policy and procedures document, and other publicly available documents.

Standard 2: Governance and Autonomy

The certification program must be structured and governed in ways that are appropriate and effective for the profession, occupation, role, or specialty area; that ensure stakeholder representation; and that ensure autonomy in decision-making over all essential certification activities.

Essential Elements:

A. The certification program must have established policies and procedures showing that the governance structure and the process for selection and removal of certification board members protects against undue influence that could compromise the integrity of the certification process.

B. The certification organization must identify its status as a legal entity (or part of a legal entity) and demonstrate that the certification board has autonomy in decision-making for all essential certification policies and activities.

C. The composition of the certification board must include individuals from the certified population and may include other appropriate stakeholder groups. The certification program must identify its stakeholders and provide an ongoing mechanism to solicit their input.

D. The certification board must include at least one member, with voting rights, that represents the public or non-employer consumer interest. The certification program must document how the public interest is routinely represented and protected.

E. The certification program must demonstrate that members of the certification board do not have a conflict of interest in their overall capacity to serve that could compromise the integrity of the certification program.

Commentary:

1. The appropriate structure and governance of a certification program should reflect the interests of the general public in the availability and implementation of the credential. In traditional forms of professional or occupational certification, the public interest requires direct protection of essential certification decisions from undue or improper influence. Such protection is especially important when a certification program is sponsored by a professional membership association or proprietary entity. The certification program may be a stand-alone legal entity or part of an existing legal entity. The authority of the certification board or governing body should be clearly defined. The tax status of the legal entity should be documented.

2. Essential certification decisions refer to the core aspects of a certification program, such as eligibility standards; standards for initial certification and maintaining certification; disciplinary determinations; the development, administration, and scoring of examinations; and the selection of subject-matter experts (SMEs).

3. Decisions that are NOT considered essential include those decisions related to employee selection, office location, marketing and communications efforts, and final budget or contract approval as long as sufficient financial resources are provided for the certification program and policies and procedures are in place to provide for autonomy in essential certification decisions.

4. To ensure a balance of stakeholder input, a system of rotating membership on the certification board over a reasonable period of time may be implemented.

5. Undue influence may result from pressures that diminish or negate the certification program's ability to act freely on behalf of the interests of the certification program. Undue influence may also be caused by a lack of balanced representation on the certification board. Examples of undue influence can include pressure from a parent organization or outside entity to adjust certification standards, limit the number of certificants, or either reduce or elevate the established standard or requirements. Appointment of a significant number of certification board members by a parent organization or related entity may be considered to constitute undue influence. The certifying organization must explain how selection of the certification board, whether by appointment, election, or nomination, protects the certification board from undue influence.

6. Each certification program has its own set of stakeholder groups that have an interest in the quality, governance, and operation of the certification program. Certificants are a stakeholder group for all certification programs. The public is a stakeholder group for all certification programs whose certificants provide goods or services to the public.

7. When a certification program involves unique factors, such as a proprietary product and/or service, sensitive intellectual property issues, and/or issues related to national security, these issues may be taken into account when determining the certification program's stakeholder groups. The certification program may limit involvement by some stakeholder groups in such cases. In such situations the certification program must develop and document alternate means for collecting and considering appropriate stakeholder input and perspective.

8. A public or consumer member's role is to bring a perspective to the decision-making of the certification program that is broader than the certificants and to help balance the certification program's role in protecting the public while advancing the interests of the certificants. Effective public or consumer members also represent the public's, consumer's, or user's perspective and interest; bring new ideas and goals to the certification board to ensure the public's interest is valued; contribute an unbiased perspective; encourage consumer-oriented positions; and bring additional public accountability and responsiveness. The public member's regular involvement in board actions and decisions should be documented.

9. The public or consumer member preferably should be a consumer or potential consumer of the certificants' skills or services. Because the certification program may serve various public groups and/or interests, a rotating system may be established to ensure that these interests are fairly represented by the public or consumer member role over time. The public or consumer should **NOT** be any of the following:

   - A current or previous member of the profession, occupation, role, or specialty area encompassed by the certification program;
   - A supervisor, manager, direct co-worker, or an employee or subordinate of individuals in the profession encompassed by the certification program;
   - An employee of an individual certified by the certification program or of an employer of individuals in the profession encompassed by the certification program;
   - A person who currently receives or within the last five years has received income from the profession encompassed by the certification program.

10. Suggested evidence to document that the Standard has been met may include a mission statement, bylaws, articles of incorporation, business plans, a policy and procedures document, a governing committee charter, certification board roster, or organizational chart.

Standard 3: Education, Training, and Certification

Appropriate separation must exist between certification and any education or training functions to avoid conflicts of interest and to protect the integrity of the certification program.

Essential Elements:

A. Clearly delineated policies and procedures, with defined roles and responsibilities, must demonstrate that all functions performed by the certification board, its certification staff, certification committee members, and all subject-matter experts (SMEs) are impartial related to education/training leading to initial certification.

B. If the certification organization or a related entity offers examination review courses or materials to prepare for the certification examination, or education/training that meets the eligibility requirements, it must meet the following requirements:

   - The organization or related entity must not state or imply that the examination review courses and/or preparatory materials are the best or only means for preparing adequately for the certification examination;

- There must be no advantage given to candidates who participate in examination review courses or education/training that meets the eligibility requirements;
- The purchase of these courses and materials must be optional; and
- The certification organization or related entity must not state or imply that its education or training programs are the only or preferred route to certification.

Commentary:

1. If education/training is a prerequisite for taking the certification examination, a certification program may require graduation from, or completion of, a program accredited or approved by an accrediting or approval body independent from the certification board.

2. A certification board, its members, certification staff, and volunteers who have access to examination content cannot be involved in the creation, accreditation, approval, endorsement, or delivery of examination review courses, preparatory materials, or training programs designed to prepare for the certification examination. Appropriate firewalls should be in place to avoid an appearance of a conflict of interest. In certain situations, it may be appropriate for faculty from an educational program that leads to certification eligibility to participate in limited item writing.   In addition, a certification board can determine what education (if any) is required for initial certification, and what continuing education (if any) is required for recertification.

3. The certification organization may offer sample items, a practice examination and a bibliography of textbooks and other references to help candidates prepare for certification, but the practice examination cannot be required or endorsed as a preferred method of preparation for the certification exam.

4. Suggested evidence to document that the Standard has been met includes organizational chart (clearly showing certification staff and roles, certification board, education staff, and a parent organization board of directors, if applicable), conflict of interest statements, and publicly available documents describing the relationship between training and certification.

Standard 4: Financial Resources

The certification organization must have sufficient financial resources to conduct ongoing, effective and sustainable certification and recertification activities.

Essential Elements:

A. The certification program's financial reports must demonstrate adequate resources available to support ongoing certification and recertification activities.

B. For programs that are not independently financially viable and are supported by another entity, written agreements with that entity and documentation of financial viability of that supporting entity must be included with the application.

Commentary:

1. Evidence should include two years of certification-related financial statements (e.g., balance sheets, income statements, and any tax filings). Statements are not required to be audited.

2. If in existence less than two years, the certification program should provide available financial statements and projections of likely revenues and expenses based on a reasonable, good-faith estimate for the next two years.

Standard 5: Human Resources

Essential Elements:

A. The certification program must identify primary personnel responsible for conducting certification activities (e.g., staff, consultants, psychometricians, vendors) along with their roles and qualifications for those certification activities.

B. The certification program must demonstrate appropriate oversight and monitoring of those personnel performing certification activities.

Commentary:

1. The certification program should have sufficient human resources to conduct certification activities. These activities could be adequately handled with services from a testing company, consultants, or a management service.

2. Suggested evidence to document that the Standard has been met include staff job descriptions, lists of volunteers (non-subject-matter experts) and their qualifications, curriculum vitae or biographies, policies and procedures related to oversight and monitoring of staff, organizational charts, and lists of contracted vendors.

Standard 6: Information for Candidates

The certification program must publish certification information that concerns existing and prospective certificants.

Essential Elements:

The certification program must make the following information publicly available:

A. Materials outlining all processes and procedures regarding application and eligibility;

B. A description of the examination used to make certification decisions;

C. Descriptions of examination processes, including all modes of examination delivery and the circumstances in which they are offered to potential candidates;

D. Procedures for candidates requesting a testing accommodation;

E. A nondiscrimination and fairness policy;

F. A policy for retesting of failing candidates;

G. Policies related to reconsideration of adverse certification decisions; and

H. Annual reports of the total number of candidates examined, pass/fail statistics, and the number of individuals currently certified for each program.

1. "Examination" may refer to a single examination, multiple methods of assessment, or more than one examination.

2. The description of the examination should include a detailed listing and/or outline of the content domains and weightings. Other information should include examination format and time allowed.

3. Policies related to fairness should describe adequate protection against discrimination in access to certification under all applicable jurisdictional laws and regulations.

4. The procedures through which candidates request accommodations should be written and published, with clear directions concerning the submission of documentation supporting the request.

5. Adverse certification decisions include but are not limited to disciplinary actions, or denial of eligibility or recertification.

6. Suggested evidence to document that the Standard has been met includes a policy and procedures manual, a candidate handbook, website links, annual reports to stakeholders, or other publicly available documents or forms.

Standard 7: Program Policies

The certification program must establish, enforce, and periodically review certification policies and procedures related to certification and challenges to certification decisions.

Essential Elements:

A. A certification program must enforce and periodically review policies and procedures for determining an applicant, candidate, or certificant's compliance with established certification requirements.

B. In establishing the eligibility requirements for taking the certification examination, the certification board must provide a rationale, either qualitative and/or quantitative, for all eligibility requirements.

C. The certification program must not unreasonably limit access to certification.

D. The rationale for the retesting policy for candidates who have failed the examination must be provided.

E. The process for reviewing requests for accommodation must follow all applicable jurisdictional laws and regulations.

F. Information must be available to interested parties for all requirements to obtain and maintain certification. The process to request reconsideration of an adverse decision must be made available to applicants, candidates, and certificants affected by the decision.

Commentary:

1. Programs should provide documentation about how candidate policies are established and reviewed.

2. Prerequisites may be used to set a minimum requirement to be eligible for certification. There should be a clear explanation, along with any relevant data if available, as to why the requirements (e.g. educational, experiential, holding another credential or a combination) are established.

3. Policies and procedures used by the certification program to judge candidates' compliance with each certification eligibility requirement should be documented. Acceptable forms of verification may include an attestation on an application form, submission of transcripts or other verification by the applicant, auditing of applicant information, and direct verification conducted by the certification program. The methods and procedures selected should reflect the potential risk to the program if the candidate has not accurately reported their compliance with the eligibility requirements. The certification program policy should include both the verification procedures used and the rationale for the selected procedures.

4. Policies and procedures restricting access to certification, which include the requirement of membership in an association, exclusion of nonmembers, required purchases of other products or services, differential pricing for members, or other potentially anticompetitive conduct, will be carefully reviewed for justification and reasonableness. However, it is permissible for a certificant to be granted membership in a membership organization by virtue of receiving and maintaining the certification.

5. Maintaining certification includes abiding by standards of practice, code of ethics, or other certification policies. Policies for filing and handling complaints, taking disciplinary actions, and allowing reconsideration or appeal of adverse certification decisions should be included. The reconsideration process for adverse decisions should be appropriate and promote fairness to the applicant, candidate, or certificant.

6. Procedures for requesting accommodations for candidates with a disability should be stated clearly and be publicly available. The process should include mechanisms that will ensure that proper evidence is submitted to the program to assist it in making a determination regarding the requested accommodation.

7. Any accommodation provided should be reasonable and not compromise the fundamental nature of assessment or the validity of the certification decision. Certification programs should not reveal on score reports or certificates that any accommodation was provided during the administration of the examination.

8. Examples of applicable laws and regulations include the Americans with Disabilities Act for organizations operating in the United States and American entities operating outside of the United States, nondiscrimination laws, antitrust laws, applicable laws that govern the industry or profession, and other relevant provisions.

9. Suggested evidence to document that the Standard has been met may include policies and procedures, forms, meeting minutes, a candidate handbook, and the organization website.

Standard 8: Awarding of Certification

The certification program must award certification only after the knowledge and/or skill of the individual candidate has been evaluated and determined to be acceptable.

Essential Elements:

A. If any current certificants were granted certification without having to meet the examination requirements established for certification, a rationale must be provided to explain how the knowledge and/or skill of those individuals was evaluated and found sufficient. Any procedure for granting a credential in the absence of evaluating the knowledge and/or skill of an individual by a program's examination is not permitted once the program has applied for accreditation.

B. Once a program has been accredited, it may grant reciprocal certification to individuals who hold a similar certification only if the program can demonstrate content and empirical equivalence between its examination and the examination of the other program. It must also provide evidence of comparability between its certification and recertification requirements and the other program's requirements.

C. If a certifying body issues a trademark, service mark, or certification mark ("mark") to recognize achievement of a particular credential, the certifying body must have in place policies to ensure appropriate use of any such mark.

Commentary:

1. It is common practice for only those subject matter experts who developed the initial examination form to be granted the credential without meeting examination requirements.

2. Granting reciprocal certification presupposes that the sponsors of both programs are in agreement about the arrangement. In some cases, a certification program may cease to exist or an organization is dissolved, and their certificants may be able to recertify with another organization if there is adequate demonstration of equivalence as outlined.

3. Only individuals who have been granted the certification and appropriately maintained the certification may use the mark. Use of the mark may only be made consistent with the scope for which the certification was granted and all applicable use policies of the certifying body, and not in a misleading or fraudulent manner. The certifying body's policies should provide that it shall take all appropriate steps including legal or other action, such as requiring discontinuation of use of the marks or suspension or revocation of the certification, to protect its rights in the marks from unauthorized use.

Standard 9: Records Retention and Management Policies

The certification program must have a records management and retention policy for all certification related records.

Essential Elements:

A. Programs must maintain records of applicants, candidates, current certificants, and previous certificants for the period of time appropriate for the legal environment applicable to the

certifying program. At a minimum, programs must verify the names of current certificants and certificate numbers (if applicable) as requested.

B.   The policy must indicate the length of time records are retained for certificant information, personal information, and examination results.

C.   The policy must indicate the length of time records of examination data and reports required to provide evidence of validity and reliability of the examination are retained.

D.   The policy must be consistent with any applicable laws or agreements for retention, disposal, and destruction of documents.

Commentary:

1.   Unless there are extenuating circumstances, such as national security, upon request from any member of the public, the certification program should provide and verify that a certificant possesses currently valid certification. Policies governing verification should allow disclosure of whether the certificant is currently in good standing, without communicating other information that may violate the confidentiality rights of certificants. However, it is permissible for programs to allow certificants to opt out of public listings for various reasons, including security, employer concerns, etc.

2.   It is generally advised, but not required, that current certificants be listed in a publicly available directory.

Standard 10: Confidentiality

The certification program must have policies and procedures that cover all personnel involved in the certification program for the access, maintenance, and release of privileged and confidential examination and candidate information.

Essential Elements:

A.   Signed confidentiality or nondisclosure agreements from all personnel (including staff, certification board members, proctors, examiners, consultants and vendors, SMEs, and applicants/certificants) involved in the certification program must be maintained on record and enforced for protection of privileged information for current and prospective certificants.

B.   The certification program must identify all authorized personnel with access to confidential examination, applicant, candidate, or certificant information.

C.   Applicant, candidate, and certificant privacy must be maintained and any records policies established must protect confidential information of the individual.

D.   Personnel with access to confidential examination items must be restricted from eligibility for the examination or developing or delivering preparatory courses or materials for a reasonable period after access has ended.

E.   Access to individual records must be restricted to the applicant, candidate, certificant, or authorized personnel unless express written permission has been obtained to release any part

of the information or a court order or other legal process requires the release of such information.

1. All information related to the certification examination, including but not limited to the examination, the detailed job analysis report (as opposed to a summary of the job analysis, which must be publicly available), candidate information, proposed or selected examination items, confidential examination administration information, confidential examination construction information, item-level psychometric information related to the examination (other than aggregate examination results, which must be made publicly available), and the like may be considered to be the confidential and proprietary information of the certification program. However, although not required, a program may choose to make its detailed job analysis report available to stakeholders without violating this standard.

2. Written confidentiality agreements should be signed by all persons having access to examination information of any kind, including but not limited to the program's board members, staff, volunteers, committee members, SMEs, vendors, proctors, and the candidates themselves. These confidentiality agreements should contain covenants protecting the secrecy of such information by containing an express agreement as to the confidentiality of such examination information and an express agreement as to the nondisclosure of any such confidential examination information by the person executing the agreement.

3. Any individual with access to the examination items, including staff, board members, SMEs, and consultants, should not be allowed to sit for the examination or provide training to prepare for the examination for a justifiable period after they no longer have such access, unless their access to examination items is very limited within a robust item bank. This period will depend on the extent to which the individual had access to the item bank and may also depend on examination update criteria, such as frequency of updating the examination items, the size of the item bank, and the number of examination forms.

4. Policies or other documentation that includes provisions for confidentiality may be provided as evidence to demonstrate compliance with this standard, such as vendor/consultant contracts, proctor manuals, and staff and volunteer confidentiality forms.

Standard 11: Conflict of Interest

The certification program must demonstrate that policies and procedures are established and applied to avoid conflicts of interest for all personnel who are involved in certification decisions or examination development, implementation, maintenance, delivery, and revision.

Essential Elements:

A. The certification program must have a record of and enforce signed conflict of interest agreements with all personnel involved in certification decisions or examination development, implementation, maintenance, delivery, and updating. The certification program must identify who may serve as a proctor, examiner, or judge for any examinations, and documentation must specify the rules and conditions for serving in these capacities.

B. The certification program must have and enforce policies and procedures for recusing related personnel from certain tasks, discussions, or decisions if there is a conflict of interest in a particular circumstance but not in their overall capacity to serve.

Commentary:

1. Proctors, judges, and examiners should not have a vested interest (either clear, potential, or perceived) in the outcome of any examination. Therefore, they are considered third-party professionals who have signed confidentiality and conflict of interest agreements.

2. There may not be a disqualifying conflict of interest (either clear, potential, or perceived) in an individual's overall capacity to serve, but limited situations may arise where that individual's participation may raise concerns about a potential conflict of interest. In these situations, the organization should follow policies and procedures to recuse the individual from part or all of the discussion or vote.

3. Suggested evidence includes sample conflict of interest agreements, policies and procedures, proctor manuals, bylaws, and employee and operations manuals.

Standard 12: Security

The certification program must establish, apply, and periodically review policies and procedures for the secure retention of candidate and examination information.

Essential Elements:

A. The certification program must have policies and procedures that address the secure maintenance of all applicant, candidate, and certificant personal information, applications, and scores.

B. The certification program's policies and procedures must have provisions for secure methods for examination development and maintenance, including item security and examination security.

Commentary:

1. Certification programs are responsible for protecting the integrity of examination information. This responsibility requires a security program that restricts access to examination information to authorized personnel.

2. Suggested evidence includes policy and procedure manuals and signed confidentiality and conflict of interest agreements.

Standard 13: Panel Composition

The certification program must use panels of qualified subject-matter experts (SMEs) to provide insight and guidance and to participate in job analysis, standard setting, and other examination development activities.

Essential Elements:

A. Each panel must represent the relevant characteristics of the population to be certified as the program defines them. The process of recruitment and involvement of SMEs must prevent the undue or disproportionate influence of any individual or group.

B. The certification program must document information about the qualifications of all panel members.

C. The certification program must document the responsibilities entrusted to panels and panelists.

D. Documentation of panel meetings must include decisions and recommendations of panelists.

Commentary:

1. A system of terms of service that includes a rotation schedule for panel membership is a useful means of ensuring broad input into the examination program.

2. The members of each panel should be provided with information regarding the purpose of the examination, the role of the panel, the rules governing panelists' participation, and a general description of the activities in which they will be involved.

3. Most members of a panel should be certified in the discipline; however, individuals who are qualified in other disciplines may serve as panelists. Examples of such individuals include supervisors, university faculty members, and regulators.

4. Individuals may serve on more than one panel, and they may serve for several years; however, certification programs should ensure that there is fair opportunity for a broad range of SMEs to participate over time.

5. Suggested evidence to document that the Standard has been met may include the following: procedures and requirements for the selection of qualified individuals for the panels; lists of panelists along with their key characteristics related to the purpose of the panel on which they are serving, and panel meeting minutes.

Standard 14: Job Analysis

The certification program must have a job analysis that defines and analyzes domains and tasks related to the purpose of the credential, and a summary of the study must be published.

Essential Elements:

A. The job analysis must lead to clearly delineated domains and tasks that characterize proficient performance.

B. A job analysis must be conducted in accordance with sound psychometric practice. If a validation survey is not conducted, sufficient justification for relying only on non-quantitative data must be provided.

C. The report of the job analysis must describe the methods, results, and outcomes of the job analysis study, including supporting documentation for each element and sufficient information to justify the study's findings and conclusions.

D. A job analysis must be conducted frequently enough to ensure that the content specifications accurately reflect current practice.

Commentary:

1. Multiple methods exist to define domains, tasks, and associated knowledge and/or skill. Appropriate strategies may include the following:

    - Use of committees of qualified subject-matter experts representing key professional characteristics;
    - Review of related practice-or job-based information, or a review of information from a previous study;
    - Collection of information using logs, observations of practice, interviews, and/or focus panels;
    - Review of curricula and training materials; and
    - Other recognized methods.

    The certification program should document the methods by which it defines the content domains, tasks, and associated knowledge and/or skills and its rationale for selecting these processes and methods.

2. Validation of the delineated domains, tasks, and associated knowledge and/or skills is typically accomplished by surveying current certificants and/or a representative sample of the population that is the intended target audience for the certification.

3. Validation surveys should include rating scales specifically selected and tailored as necessary to assess the critical domains and tasks (and associated knowledge and/or skills if included) to be examined.

4. It is important for surveys to sample broadly within the population as defined by the program to ensure representation by key characteristics, such as major practice area, job title, work setting, geography, ethnic diversity, gender, years of work experience, geographic region (including international, if applicable), and other demographic variables. Stakeholders such as educators, supervisors, and employers may be included, if appropriate. The population from which the sample is drawn should be clearly defined, justified, and related to the purpose of the credential. The sample size and methods by which it is drawn should be psychometrically defensible.

5. Analysis of survey ratings data should determine how and to what degree the performance domains and tasks (and associated knowledge and/or skills if included) relate to the purpose of the credential. A description of the criteria that determine how ratings data are used to assess

the validity of the domains and tasks (and knowledge and/or skills if included) should be provided. The rationale for any departures from empirical data should be documented.

6. Analysis of the demographic and professional characteristics of the survey respondents should validate that respondents are representative of the population as defined by the program. Certification programs should identify any patterns in responses based on respondent characteristics that differ substantially from the known characteristics of the population. They should also describe the methods used to mitigate such findings (e.g., weighting of results, subgroup comparisons).

7. Certification programs should ensure that the job analysis is current. Although there is no definitive rule about how often a review or analysis should be conducted, each certification program should establish its own policy, procedure, time frame, and rationale underlying these decisions. As a general guideline, a job analysis should be conducted every five years. However, for fast-changing professions, occupations, roles, or specialty areas, an analysis every one to three years may be more appropriate. Similarly, when content is not expected to change rapidly, certification programs may find it appropriate to wait as long as seven to eight years between job analyses. Regardless of the frequency of job analyses, programs should have an ongoing mechanism in place to periodically review and confirm relevance of content specifications.

8. Evidence to document that the Standard has been met requires a complete report describing the conduct and results of the job analysis. This report may include the following items:

    •   A description of the background and experience of subject-matter experts and professionals who participated in various phases of the job analysis;

    •   Identification of the psychometric consultants or organization used to conduct the job analysis or important phases of it;

    •   A description of methods used to delineate domains and tasks, (and associated knowledge and/or skills if included);

    •   A description of the survey sampling plan and its rationale;

    •   Documentation of survey results, including return rate, analysis of ratings data, algorithms, or other psychometric methods used to analyze or combine ratings data, and a rationale supporting representativeness of survey findings;

    •   A copy of the job survey(s); and

    •   Date range or year of the study.

9. The complete report may be considered a confidential document. However, in these cases, programs should make publicly available a summary of the study or a statement regarding the job analysis.

Standard 15: Examination Specifications

The certification program must establish specifications that describe what the examination is intended to measure as well as the design of the examination and requirements for its standardization and use, consistent with the stated objectives of the certification program.

Essential Elements:

A. The examination specifications must clearly state the objective of the examination, including what the examination is intended to measure (e.g., cognitive knowledge, psychomotor skills, general competency) and the level of practice (e.g., entry, advanced, specialty, or as defined by the program) being measured.

B. Specifications must address the critical elements of the whole examination program along with clear rationales. Examination design considerations must be specified and explained clearly.

C. The plan for weighting sections of an examination must be based on a job analysis; the plan must provide precise direction regarding the weighting structure for each section.

Commentary:

1. The stated objective may include references to practice level (e.g. entry, advanced, or specialty). The type of items to be used and the scoring of those items should align with the objective.

2. Essential examination design considerations should be described in the specifications for the examination, including the following items, which the certification program may explain in detail in relation to other psychometric standards:

    *   The method for scoring candidates' responses;
    *   The method for establishing the passing standard and for assessing the accuracy of scores and the decisions made on the basis of scores;
    *   Methods for ensuring equivalence among forms of the examination; and
    *   Procedures intended to ensure that forms of the examination that are developed over time continue to assess relevant competencies in light of changes that may occur in the profession.

3. Specifications should describe the method for the assembly of items into forms of the examination. When examinations are subdivided into sections based on constructs being assessed and item types used, programs should describe the relative weight for each section, and the explanation should be supported by a rationale from the job analysis. Other features of each form of an examination that should be specified include the following:

    *   Examination length;
    *   Administration time;
    *   The number and/or proportion of scored and non-scored (pretest) items, if any; and
    *   The number and/or proportion of new and used items.

4. Because a typical goal of examination assembly is the production of an equivalent challenge for candidates of equal proficiency across multiple forms, precise specifications are expected. Any latitude permitted in the assembly and/or scoring of new forms, which should also be defined, should support the conclusion that each candidate was assessed on the same content.

5. Suggested evidence to document that the Standard has been met is an examination specifications document that presents the objective for the examination, a description of the target audience for the examination, a description of the construct(s) and item types to be used, the weighted content outline, expectations for the assembly of the examination, examination administration requirements, and a general description of the plan for scoring and equating the examination and for conducting the psychometric analysis.

Standard 16: Examination Development

Certification examinations must be developed and assembled in accordance with the established examination specifications and with sound examination development principles and practices.

Essential Elements:

A. A written and systematic item development plan must be developed and followed to ensure that examination content is accurate, current, and appropriate for candidates, regardless of format and candidate demographics.

B. All versions of a certification examination must be the product of an appropriately designed, documented, and executed examination construction process.

- The sampling plan for the examination items must correspond to the examination specifications.

- When forms are to be translated into another language, the process must be designed to ensure that content is equivalent.

- The established process must be documented to provide evidence of the comparability and integrity of content across forms of the examination.

- When the nomenclature used to classify items (e.g., content outline) changes, then items must be reclassified.

C. The development of subjectively scored items (scored by raters) and scoring rubrics must employ rigorous methods that maximize validity. When raters are used to score items, rater qualifications, training materials, and rubrics must satisfy the established specifications for standardization and the validity of scores.

Commentary:

1. Evidence in support of the validity of examination results is demonstrated by documenting conformity to specifications for every form of the examination. Conformity to examination specifications is fundamental to comparability in the content of forms that are replaced over time.

2. Evidence of alignment to specifications provided for different examination formats (e.g., performance, simulation, and multiple-choice examinations) may be different. For example, evidence provided for performance-based tests may indicate the classification of prompts and the elements of a scoring rubric, while evidence for multiple-choice examinations may be the number of items in each category.

3. Steps involved in the examination development process may include but are not limited to:

   - Training of SMEs;
   - Developing items;
   - Documenting the accuracy, currency, and relevance of examination items and scoring rubrics and their congruence with the purpose of the examination;
   - Using empirical item performance data to inform decisions related to the evaluation, revision, and use of items;
   - Assembling new forms of the examination by selecting appropriate items, revising selected items when appropriate, evaluating and refining scoring rubrics (for subjectively scored examinations), and adhering to examination specifications;
   - Structuring, delivering, and documenting training provided to item writers, item reviewers, and others who produce examination content in a professional and consistent manner; and
   - Documenting the development and assembly process for forms of an examination.

4. Suggested evidence to document that the Standard has been met may include the following: training materials; agendas; reports on item development; procedures for the assembly of forms; procedures and criteria used to examine the performance of examination items or other examination components for inclusion, revision, or removal from the certification process; and technical reports.

Standard 17: Standard Setting

A certification program must perform and document a standard setting study that relates performance on the examination to proficiency, so that the program can set a passing score appropriate for the certification.

Essential Elements:

A. The procedures used to establish performance standards must be based on generally accepted measurement principles consistent with the purpose of the examination and item format(s) used.

B. The certification program must document the standard-setting study in sufficient detail to allow for replication, including descriptions of the procedures followed, results, and appropriate interpretations. If the report is considered confidential, the organization must make a general description of the methods it used in the standard-setting study publicly available.

C. The certification program must evaluate standards of proficiency frequently enough to reflect current practice.

Commentary:

1. Multiple methods exist for standard setting. Appropriate strategies include a review of content or empirical data. Content-based methods may use subject-matter experts to make judgments about an intact form, a representative sample of examination items, or candidates' completed examinations. Empirical methods use differences in candidate group performance and/or the performance of candidates on other measures linked to relevant standards of proficiency to establish performance standards.

2. The facilitator of a standard-setting study should use item-level and test-level statistics, when available, to monitor the judgment of participants. When feasible, participants may be provided with these statistics. This may mean that the performance standard(s) cannot be set until after an examination has been administered to a sufficient number of candidates. If item difficulty values are relevant to the standard setting method used, they should be provided to judges during the standard setting process. Estimates of the impact on the passing rate for hypothetical performance standards at various points may be shared with participants as appropriate during the standard-setting process if total-score data are available. Information about candidates (such as education and years of experience) underlying the statistical information should be provided because it helps to determine how closely the sample represents borderline candidates. In some situations, little or no relevant statistical information is available (e.g., a new certification program, a small number of candidates, or a significant change in eligibility requirements).

3. The judges in a standard-setting study should be provided with information and training regarding the purpose of the assessment, a conceptual description of the standard of proficiency, eligibility criteria, and how to apply standard-setting process(es) to be used. Judges should be trained in the interpretation of any statistics that are shown to have a sound basis for making required judgments. Judges should be informed that they will make a standard-setting recommendation to the governing body or other policymakers who have the authority to establish it.

4. If the conceptual description of the standard of proficiency is changed, then the performance standard should be re-evaluated.

5. The certification organization should examine, and revise if necessary, the performance standard whenever significant content or specification changes occur for an examination. A standard setting study should be conducted following completion of each job analysis study at a minimum but can be conducted more frequently to support programmatic requirements.

6. Suggested evidence to document that the standard has been met includes a standard-setting study report that addresses the following, as appropriate:

   - The rationale for selecting the method used;
   - The rationale for the number of panelists, the manner of selecting the panelists, and their qualifications;
   - Qualifications of the psychometric consultants or organization designing and implementing the process;

- Procedures and/or materials used;

- A conceptual description of the level of proficiency required for certification;

- Descriptions or conceptualizations developed by the panelists;

- Data-collection activities and procedures;

- Analysis of the results of the standard-setting study;

- Standard-setting recommendations as developed by the panel;

- Any adjustments made to the standard-setting recommendation by a governing body or policy group;

- The effective date of the standard;

- If available, the resulting pass rate(s), and if multiple hurdles are used, the pass rate for each.

Standard 18: Examination Administration

The certification program must develop and adhere to its policies and procedures for each examination administration. The procedures must ensure that all candidates take the examination under comparable conditions, safeguard the confidentiality of examinations, and address security at every stage of the process.

Essential Elements:

A. Examinations must be administered under secure and confidential protocols that restrict access to examination content to authorized individuals throughout examination storage, conveyance, administration, and disposal. Program policies must be in place to hold examinees accountable for improper behavior before, during, and after examination administration. The program must make a summary of security policies, incident review processes, and disciplinary procedures available to examinees.

B. Examinations must be administered using standardized procedures that have been specified by the certification program to ensure comparable conditions for all candidates and promote the validity of scores. The program must document and follow standardized examination administration procedures, including verification of candidate identity, regardless of the examination delivery or proctoring method. The program must establish and document procedures stating what it expects of examination administration personnel and the procedures to follow to ensure adherence to these requirements.

C. Trained proctors must be used in the proper administration of examinations to minimize the influence of variations in examination administration on scores, regardless of the examination delivery method or examination format. Proctor training must include the management and reporting of irregularities. Proctors must have no conflict of interest or any ability to influence examination results. Proctors must ensure that approved accommodations have been provided. Proctors must confirm they have read and agreed to abide by the procedures outlined in the examination administration manual. For performance examinations, proctors must be provided with specifications for site layout and required tools and equipment to ensure standardized administration.

D. The certification program must have processes to monitor ongoing compliance with examination administration and security procedures.

Commentary:

1. Thorough security protocols help contribute to the reduction of construct-irrelevant variance in scores. It is important that security policies and nondisclosure agreements be in force and documented for every party participating in the examination administration process. Certification program should monitor the administration of its examination, whether administered through its own staff or volunteers or outsourced.

2. Administration sites should offer similar conditions, such as adequate lighting, comfortable seating, and a quiet environment free from distractions, to ensure examinees have a fair opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge, skills, and ability. Working space must be sufficient, and spacing between examinees or workstation divider requirements must be defined to minimize cheating opportunities.

3. The certification program should document and review irregularities. The program should take appropriate preventive action to address foreseeable problems in examination administration and security procedures to ensure fairness and guard against breaches.

4. The publication of policies, rules, and sanctions may contribute to the certification program's rights and ability to enforce security and examination administration requirements, take corrective action, and impose sanctions.

5. Suggested evidence to document that the Standard has been met may include the following:

    • Candidate handbook or similar document

    • Examination administration manual

    • Quality-control policy and procedure documents

    • Security procedures manual

    • Nondisclosure agreements (NDAs)

Standard 19: Scoring and Score Reporting

The certification program must employ and document sound psychometric procedures for scoring, interpreting, and reporting examination results.

Essential Elements:

A. The certification program must compute scores in a manner that is appropriate, given the design and format of the examination and the purpose of the certification.

B. For performance examinations, the certification program must minimize the degree to which candidates' scores may be affected by having a particular rater or performance task.

C. The certification program must document the procedures used in scoring, interpreting, and reporting examination results*.*

D. All candidates must be provided information on their overall performance on an examination.

E. Failing candidates must be provided with information about their performance in relation to the passing standard. If the program provides feedback to candidates such as domain-level information, candidates must be provided guidance about limitations in interpreting and using that feedback.

Commentary:

1. Certification programs should establish and describe quality-control procedures for monitoring the accuracy of calculations used to produce scores and the conversion of raw scores to standardized, equated, or scaled scores. The organization should clearly document the weighting of items or tasks. The scale on which scores are reported should support interpretations that are consistent with the purpose of the examination

2. For performance and other examinations where responses are scored by judgment, developers should document methods for developing scoring rubrics, judging responses, reducing rater bias, and increasing inter-rater agreement and consistency to ensure an acceptable level of consistency in scoring judgment-based items. Types of documentation to support these items may include the following:

   - Criteria used for selecting judges;

   - A description of the materials and methods for training judges;

   - Evidence demonstrating that the primary source of variation in candidate scores comes from candidate performance, not rater error;

   - Summaries and results of process, rater, or score audits or other technical controls to ensure that the candidates' performances are the primary determinant of whether they pass or fail examinations.

3. The certification program should provide candidates with an explanation of the types of scores reported, appropriate uses, and potential misuses of reported score information.
   Feedback should be appropriate for the type of examination.

4. If domain-level information has low reliability, programs are advised against reporting it to candidates and other stakeholders. When domain-level or other specific feedback is given to candidates, the certification program should provide estimates of its precision and/or other guidance.

5. The certification program should ensure the fairness of the examination for all populations. If the program detects potential for unfairness, it should take steps to understand its causes and, if possible, remedy it.

6. Suggested evidence to document that the Standard has been met may include descriptions of scoring procedures, training documents, and quality-control procedures, such as the following:

   - Security procedures pertaining to scoring, reporting scores, and maintaining score records;

- Quality-control procedures pertaining to scoring, reporting scores, and maintaining score records (checklists, policies, narrative);

- Sample score reports for passing and failing candidates, including instructions on interpreting feedback that is provided;

- Policies, procedures, and supporting materials for scoring objectively scored examinations;

- Policies, procedures, and supporting materials for judgment-based scoring (e.g., procedures, required number of judges, development of and training on scoring rubrics).

Standard 20: Reliability

The certification program must ensure that scores are sufficiently reliable for the decisions that are intended.

Essential Elements:

A. Certification programs must calculate and report estimates of score reliability, decision consistency, and standard errors of measurement using methods that are appropriate for the characteristics of the examination.

B. Estimates of score reliability and decision consistency must be reasonable to support accurate pass/fail decisions. If the certification program makes pass/fail decisions based on subscores (i.e., the assessment is multiple-hurdle, or non-compensatory), the reliability of each subscore for which a pass/fail decision is rendered must be reasonable.

Commentary:

1. The selection of reliability statistics required for an examination depends on the type of assessment and the purpose of the scores. Programs should document the reliability estimate(s) and provide a rationale for the methods used (e.g., inter-rater agreement and/or inter-rater consistency for performance examinations; internal consistency estimates for multiple-choice examinations).

2. If a program makes decisions using domain-level information, it should demonstrate that the reliability of that information is sufficient and provide a rationale for how it weights and uses domain-level information.

3. When candidate volumes are so small or there are other factors which lead to reliability estimates that are not meaningful, programs should describe the procedures used to demonstrate that the decisions made on the basis of scores are reasonable and fair.

4. Suggested evidence to document that this Standard has been met includes the following:

   - Reliability coefficients, overall standard error of measurement, information function, and/or other statistics pertaining to the consistency of scores;
   - Indices of classification consistency, conditional standard errors of measurement, or other measures of score consistency around the cut score; and

- Information about how non-compensatory domain-level scores and other measures are evaluated and combined.

Standard 21: Examination Score Equating

The certification program must demonstrate that different forms of an examination do not advantage or disadvantage candidates because of differences in the content framework and/or difficulty of particular forms.

Essential Elements:

A. Each active form of the examination must align to currently applicable content specifications, consistent with the requirements of the equating model.

B. The certification program must use statistical equating procedures grounded in accepted psychometric practices.

C. When examinations are adapted across languages, certification programs must demonstrate that results obtained from adapted and source versions are comparable.

D. For examinations that are subjectively scored (i.e., using raters), certification programs must demonstrate that results are equivalent across raters and assessment tasks.

Commentary:

1. Certification programs should monitor form equivalence on an ongoing basis. The equating procedures employed should be the most rigorous permitted by such factors as candidate volume, item type, and the established construct for the examination. Programs should report the procedures they use to ensure ongoing equivalence of forms and/or scores. The use of standard-setting procedures in place of equating procedures is generally unacceptable. A program should demonstrate that construct-irrelevant factors do not advantage or disadvantage candidates.

2. There are many reasons that a form may not match the content specifications, such as when items are deleted following preliminary item analysis during key validation. Deviation from content specifications may not require further consideration or additional review if the deviation is within the tolerance established in examination specifications. When the content distribution of scored (not pre-examination items) items falls outside the acceptable range, the procedures used to decide how the results will be treated should be documented.

3. When changes that may affect equating occur, such as the revision of examination specifications because of an update to the job analysis, a modification in the passing standard, or some other policy change, organizations should apply effective psychometric strategy(ies) to control or mitigate the impact of these events.

4. The program should document the equating procedures with a description that includes the following:

- The examination or examinations being equated;

- The rationale for the design and method of equating;
- The equating data collection design (e.g., common items, common people, random groups);
- The statistical model used to accomplish the equating (e.g., Rasch, other item response theory, and classical models); and
- The number of items and the number of examinees used in the equating procedure.

5. There should be evidence that translated or adapted examinations are testing the same construct as in the original examination. Simple translation and back-translation are not adequate. When candidate volume is sufficient to permit the analysis, differential item function studies should be used to demonstrate that the construct as manifested in the hierarchy of item difficulty is equivalent across the two versions.

Standard 22: Maintaining Certification
The certification program must require periodic recertification.

Essential Elements:

A. The certification program must have a statement of purpose for the recertification requirements that is consistent with the Commission's definition of recertification.

B. The certification program must have a definition of continuing competence that is consistent with the Commission's definition of continuing competence.

C. Certification must be time limited with a specified beginning and end date to the period of certification. The recertification period selected must be supported by a rationale that reflects how the relevant knowledge and skills for the certificants and for the field may change over time.

D. Programs applying for accreditation must require periodic recertification for all certificants.

E. The certification program must have a mechanism to verify that certificants have met the recertification requirements.

F. The certification program must make all recertification policies and procedures (including statements of purpose, definitions, and rationales) publicly available.

Commentary:

1. The Commission defines recertification as "requirements and procedures established as part of a certification program that certificants must meet to maintain competence and renew their certification."

2. The recertification requirements can either measure and/or promote continued competence.

3. The Commission defines continuing competence as "demonstrating specified levels of knowledge, skills, or ability not only at the time of initial certification but throughout an individual's professional career."

4. The public may interpret continuing competence to mean that the services provided by certificants will always be delivered at the highest-quality level regardless of practical limitations for what certification and recertification can realistically achieve. The certification program should provide an explanation of the limitations of a certification program's definition of continuing competence relative to the public's likely understanding of continuing competence.

5. Continuing competence may be defined differently than initial competence to account for role differentiation over time. For example, the range of services provided by a certificant may narrow over time due to concentration in a specialized area of service, and the certificant's range of competence may narrow.

6. Lifetime certification is not consistent with the requirement for periodic recertification.

7. The rationale for the recertification period should be based upon an estimation of the shelf life of the knowledge and/or skills fundamental to the certification as affected by knowledge degradation over time (e.g., forgetting) and the effects of technological change (e.g., obsolescence). Evidence regarding how quickly the required knowledge base changes (e.g. job analysis data) is an example of appropriate supporting evidence. Selection of a time period based solely upon convenience or historical precedent (i.e., "it has always been this way") is not an evidence-based rationale.

8. If a certification program issues a limited-duration certification with a specified termination date and with no option for an individual continuing to claim the certification beyond that date, recertification does not apply.

9. Recertification requirements may differ for more recent certificants as compared to certificants from earlier years, but all certificants must be held to some form of recertification requirements that support the goal of maintaining competence. Different requirements may be the result of the need to balance the desire to advance requirements for the future of the profession with the need to maintain the contract made with earlier certificants.

10. If any certificants are exempted from current recertification requirements, the certification program should provide a rationale to explain how the current knowledge and/or skills of those individuals will be maintained. The period during which such recertification exemptions were granted must have been terminated before the certification program applies for accreditation.

11. If a certification program allows certificants to select from among multiple recertification options, then the certification program should document how each option links to the common goal of maintaining competence.

12. If continuing education (CE) is the recertification requirement, then the certification program should address the typical limitations of CE (e.g., self-selected CE, focus on convenience and cost over need, points-oriented rather than learning-oriented, commercial or sponsorship bias) and document how it evaluates whether the CE activities support continuing competence (e.g., quality and relevance of content, effectiveness of delivery method).

13. If an examination is the recertification requirement, then the certification program should document that the examination meets the psychometric quality criteria of the *NCCA Standards*,

including reliability and validity evidence, and how the examination supports continuing competence.

14. If self-assessment is the recertification requirement, then the certification program should describe how it addresses the typical limitations of self-assessment (e.g., lack of objectivity) and how it translates the results of the self-assessment to a verifiable professional development plan.

15. If third-party assessment is the recertification requirement, then the certification program should document that the assessment mechanism serves its intended purpose and how the assessment supports continuing competence.

16. If portfolio review is the recertification requirement, then the certification program should document the criteria for portfolio development and evaluation as well as the linkage to continuing competence.

17. If certificants self-attest to compliance with the recertification requirements, then an audit process that selects a sample of all certificants and verifies their documentation of compliance is an example of an acceptable recertification mechanism.

18. If the certification program uses a sampling audit model, the program should provide the rationale for the percentage of certificants audited as well as a description of the audit process itself.

19. Forms of evidence supporting compliance could include the following:

    a. Policies that specify that all certificants are required to comply with recertification requirements.

    b. Policies and procedures that specify the consequences for certificants who do not meet recertification requirements within the specified period.

    c. Policies and procedures explaining the process for regaining certification discontinued for noncompliance with recertification requirements.

Standard 23: Quality Assurance
The certification program must have a quality-assurance program that provides consistent application and periodic review of policies and procedures.

Essential Elements:

A. Mechanisms must be in place to promote delivery of program activities as intended, including such activities as application processing, examination preparation and publication, scoring, documentation, and financial management.

B. Processes must be in place to deal with errors found in program activities.

C. Certification organizations must have policies and procedures requiring the regular review of examinations and the results obtained from their use, including the management and correction of examination-related errors.

Commentary:

1. The certification program should document evidence of regular training of staff, orientation and training of board members, and training of SMEs to demonstrate compliance with this standard.

2. Error handling involves both prevention of error through routine quality-assurance procedures and procedures to correct errors discovered after program activities are implemented or active.

3. Many organizations have an examination committee responsible for the periodic evaluation of the examination used in a program and often have staff members who work with the examination committee. These committees and staff should recommend improvements in the psychometric strategy, given that they monitor changes that may develop over time in the number and/or qualifications of candidates, the nature of the examination, and the types of decisions the examination supports.

4. The policies and procedures pertaining to the evaluation of the examination program should indicate which quality indicators the certification organization uses and how it decides upon recommendations for improvement.

5. Policies and procedures should identify the parties who have primary responsibility for monitoring examination quality and making recommendations for improvement, as well as the types of information these parties will review and the frequency of review activities.

6. Evaluation information may include item analysis, reliability, decision consistency, speededness, and candidate feedback.

7. Suggested evidence may include quality-assurance policies, meeting minutes, calendars or schedules, and training materials/logs.

Standard 24: Maintaining Accreditation

The certification program must demonstrate continued compliance to maintain accreditation.

Essential Elements:

A. The certification program must annually complete and submit information requested of the certification agency and its programs for the previous reporting year.

B. The certification program must submit any information that the Commission may require to investigate allegations of lack of compliance with NCCA Standards. The Commission reserves the right to conduct an audit to verify the integrity of the information submitted.

C. The certification program must notify the Commission in writing prior to making any material changes in the program.

Commentary:

1. Changes that are considered routine operations may be reported through the NCCA annual report process.

2. Programs should present material changes to the ICE office in writing PRIOR to implementation because of the possibility that the implementation of the change could violate current Standards. These may include major changes in any of the following:

   - Legal status or governance structure of the certification agency;

   - Purpose, scope, or activities of the certification program;

   - Purpose, scope, or objectives of any certification examinations;

   - Examination development, administration and/or evaluation procedures.

3. The Commission reserves the right to investigate (whether onsite, virtually, or through a third party) if questions arise about the integrity of the information submitted or concerns are raised about compliance to any of the NCCA Standards, whether during the initial application review or throughout the five-year accreditation cycle.

NCCA Standards Glossary

Accommodation—

A modification in the administration of an examination to compensate for the effects of a documented disability without altering the interpretation of the examination results.

Accreditation—

- **USE IN EDUCATION:** Approval of an educational institution or program according to defined standards.
- **AS RELATED TO NCCA:** Status awarded to a certification program that has demonstrated compliance with the *Standards for the Accreditation of Certification Programs* set forth by the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA).

Adaptation—

The process by which a segment of text is converted to another language and/or cultural context, preserving equivalence of meaning, level of difficulty, and conceptual complexity from the original version to the new (adapted) version.

Anti-Competitive Conduct—

Actions constituting an unreasonable restraint of trade under antitrust law.

Appeal—

The opportunity provided to an applicant, candidate, or certificant to review a decision made with regard to certification activities.

Applicant—

An individual who declares interest in earning a credential offered by a certification program, usually through the submission of materials for qualification to take the examination. See *candidate.*

Autonomy—

Management and administration of all essential certification decisions without being subject to approval by or undue influence from any other body. Also known as administrative independence.

Bias—

Regardless of context (see below) and lack of intent, bias is to be avoided.

- **IN THE CONTEXT OF EXAMINATION FAIRNESS:** Inappropriateness of content in the assessment instrument, either in terms of its irrelevance, overemphasis, or exclusion.

- **IN THE CONTEXT OF SCORING**: Scores and outcomes that are the result of the opinion of the rater rather than the performance of the candidate.

- **IN THE CONTEXT OF ELIGIBILITY AND RECERTIFICATION REQUIREMENTS:** Inappropriateness or irrelevance of requirements for certification or recertification if they are not reasonable prerequisites for competence in a profession, occupation, role, skill, or specialty area. See *fairness*.

Candidate—

An applicant who has met the eligibility qualifications for but has not yet earned a credential awarded through a certification program. See *applicant*.

Certificant—

An individual who has earned a professional certification awarded through a certification program.

Certification—

A standardized process, often voluntary, by which individuals who have demonstrated the level of knowledge and/or skill required in the profession, occupation, role, skill, or specialty area are recognized and identified to the public and other stakeholders.

Certification Agency/Organization—

The organizational or administrative unit that offers and/or operates a certification program.

Certification Board

A group of individuals appointed or elected to govern one or more certification programs and to be responsible for all certification decision-making, including governance. Also referred to as a certification committee, certification council, or *governing committee*.

Certification Program—

The standards, policies, procedures, examinations, and related products and activities through which individuals are publicly identified as qualified in a specified profession, occupation, role, skill, or specialty area.

Classical Test Theory—

The traditional psychometric methods of developing and evaluating examinations that are based on examinee raw and/or percentage scores. The two most commonly used classical item statistics are the difficulty index (p value) and discrimination index (typically the point biserial correlation [r_{pbis}]). In contrast, refer to *item response theory*.

Commentary—

As used in the *Standards*, refers to comments, remarks, and observations that clarify terms, provide examples of practice that help explain a standard, or offer suggestions regarding evidence that should be documented to demonstrate compliance.

Commission—

Refers to the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA), a body that develops accreditation standards for certification programs and awards accreditation to certification programs that apply for and comply with its standards.

Compensatory Scoring—

A model for scoring in which a candidate's pass/fail status is determined by the total score on the examination rather than section by section, as in *conjunctive scoring.* High scores in one content area can compensate for low scores in another content area.

Competence—

The ability to perform a task, function, or role at a level that meets or exceeds prescribed standards in the work environment. *Competencies* are the observable behaviors that encompass the knowledge, skills, and personal characteristics that are at or above acceptable levels of performance in the work environment.

Conditional Standard Error of Measurement—

An estimate of how accurate an attained score is in relation to the theoretical "true score" across score levels.

Confidentiality Agreement—

A confidentiality agreement is a legal contract between at least two parties that specifies rules governing confidential material, knowledge, or information that the parties wish to share with one another for certain purposes but wish to limit access by other parties. Also known as a nondisclosure agreement (NDA).

Conflict of Interest—

A situation in which an individual has private or professional interests that conflict with his/her other professional interests or responsibilities. These types of conflicts may make it difficult for a person to fulfill his/her professional responsibilities impartially. The perception of a conflict of interest may be as serious as an actual conflict of interest.

Conflict of Interest in Capacity to Serve—

A value, obligation, or priority of an individual that is fundamentally incompatible with the purposes, policies, or operations of the certification program, and that consequently precludes the individual from serving as a member of the certification board.

Conjunctive Scoring—

A model for scoring in which a candidate's pass/fail status is determined by the total score on the examination rather than section by section, as in *conjunctive scoring.* High scores in one content area can compensate for low scores in another content area.

Construct—

The trait(s), usually recall or application of knowledge or demonstration of skill, that is the assessment objective of an examination.

Construct Equivalence—

The degree to which qualitative and quantitative evidence demonstrate that two examinations measure the same traits.

Construct Irrelevant Factors—

Factors that affect examination scores or outcomes that are not intended to be part of the assessment (e.g., a noisy, poorly lit examination room or candidate reading level).

Content Domains—

A set of organized categories characterizing subject matter within which knowledge and skills may be represented.

Content Specifications—

How the content and characteristics of a test are described based on the results of a job analysis. The specifications may be structured as an outline of knowledge areas (*content domains),* a list of *tasks,* or other formats. The specifications may also include the relative emphasis of the content domains by listing their number or percentage of examination items. The number or percentage of items may be expressed as ranges. Content specifications are often referred to as a *test blueprint* or *test content outline.*

Continuing Competence—

Demonstrating specified levels of knowledge, skills, or ability throughout an individual's professional career. Related to *recertification, maintaining competence,* and *continuing education.*

Continuing Education—

Education and training activities that certificants engage in to receive credit for the purpose of maintaining competence and renewing certification. Related to r*ecertification* and *continuing competence*.

Cut Score—

A specific score on an examination at or above which candidates pass and below which candidates fail. Also known as a cutoff score or a pass/fail score.

Decision Consistency—

A measure of reliability that answers the question, "If the same examinees were administered equivalent forms of the same examination, to what extent would the pass/fail outcomes be in agreement?" Also referred to as *classification consistency.*

Disciplinary Process—

A formal, published process for the enforcement of standards governing the professional behavior (e.g., ethics) of certificants. Also related to the determination of disciplinary actions and the provision of due process.

Eligibility Requirements—

Published criteria for specified levels of education, training, and/or experience that applicants must meet to qualify for taking the certification examination(s).

Entry Level / Practice Level—

Entry level refers to the threshold that defines having a "just sufficient" or "just adequate" level of knowledge or skill to be credentialed as being safe and effective, regardless of the occupation, profession, role, skill, or specialty, or whether the credential assesses basic or advanced knowledge or skill. Entry level should be the intended *practice level* for all certification examinations.

Equating—

A statistical process used to convert scores on two or more alternate forms of an examination to a common scale for purposes of comparability and equivalence.

Error Handling—

The process for resolving errors identified during the administration scoring of an examination, or reporting of the results.

Essential Element—

A statement that is directly related to a Standard and that specifies what a certification program must do to fulfill the requirement of the Standard.

Examination—

Any assessment process, method, or instrument used to determine whether a candidate meets the established criteria of standards for practice in a profession, occupation, role, skill, or specialty area. Multiple examinations and/or formats may be used to make this determination.

Examination Blueprint—

See *content specifications*. Also called examination outline or examination content outline.

Examination Committee—

An appointed or elected body of subject matter experts (SMEs) responsible for developing certification examinations and related activities, possibly including standard setting and scoring. Also known as an assessment committee or certification blueprint committee.

Fairness—

The principle that all applicants and candidates will be treated in an equitable and consistent manner throughout the entire certification process. See _bias._

Governing Committee—
See _certification board._

Grandfathering—

The process by which individuals are granted certification without being required to meet formal examination requirements. This process has limited defensibility.

Information Function—

A curve displaying the candidate performance levels that an item or examination is most effective at measuring. This curve can be generated at the item or examination level using _item response theory._ It is not produced by _classical test theory._

Internal Consistency—

A measure of reliability that answers the question, "If the same examinees were administered equivalent forms of the same examination, to what extent would the scores be in agreement?"

Inter-Rater Reliability

The opposite of _rater bias_. In the context of scoring subjective items, high levels of inter-rater reliability indicate that raters are judging candidate performance in the same manner, based on its quality rather than on any preconceived personal opinions. Also known as _inter-rater agreement_.

Item—

Questions and/or tasks in examinations to which candidates must respond or perform.

Item Analysis—

A quality-control process of determining that items meet acceptable psychometric parameters as defined by the certification program. This can include both classical test theory and item response theory analyses.

Item Bank—

The system by which test items are stored, classified, maintained, and retrieved to facilitate item review, item development, and examination assembly.

Item Response Theory (IRT) —

A mathematical model of measurement (also known as latent trait theory) in which candidate ability and item difficulty are converted to a single common scale that provides a standardized way of comparing candidate performance and item difficulty over multiple versions of an examination. Several IRT models are acceptable for use.

Item Type or Format—

The structure of a question or task in an examination (e.g., multiple-choice, performance task).

Job Analysis—

Any of several methods used singly or in combination to identify the performance domains and associated tasks, knowledge, and/or skills relating to the purpose of the credential and providing the foundation for examination validation. Also known as task or practice analysis, job task analysis, or role delineation study.

Legal Status—

Formal legal recognition granted to organizations by the process of filing articles of incorporation or other required documents identifying them as a legal entity.

Multiple Hurdle—

The requirement to pass multiple sections of a single examination or separate examinations to earn a certification.

Open Access—

Access to certification should be available to anyone who meets the established criteria for practice in a profession, occupation, role, skill, or specialty area.

Panel—

Group of subject-matter experts (SMEs) convened to complete a certification examination-related task.

Parent Organization—

The legal entity under which a certification program is established when the certification program is part of a larger organization. The certification governing board must have autonomy from the parent organization for essential certification decisions.

Performance Examination—

A test of a candidate's ability to perform skills in a simulated or real job environment; Also known as a *practical examination*.

Policy Maker —

Usually the certification body or organization is the policy maker. However, in some credentialing contexts, an external organization (e.g., federal, state, or local government agency) may function as a policy maker by setting standards and/or policies to which a certification program must comply.

Portfolio Review—

A body of work submitted by candidates that represents their skills and abilities in the content domain being evaluated.

Prerequisite—

Documented activity or achievement required as a prior condition for next action to occur (e.g., completion of an educational program before taking a corresponding examination).

Proprietary Product or Service—

A product or service that is specifically licensed and exclusively owned by a company or person. There are specific rights associated with proprietary ownership that protect the owner from the creation of imitation products that possess the same features and functions.

Public Member—

A representative of the consumers of services provided by a certificant population serving as a voting member on the governing body of a certification program, with all rights and privileges, including holding office and serving on committees. The public member should bring a perspective to the decision and policy making of the organization that is different from that of the certificants and should help to balance the organization's role in protecting the public while advancing the interests of the profession.

Publicly Available—

Easily available and accessible, with or without request.

Publish—

To provide information and/or documents in printed or electronic format.

Quality Assurance—

Systematic organizational policies, procedures, and processes that ensure ongoing compliance and accuracy through regular reviews and monitoring to promote quality.

Rater Bias—

A distortion in the scoring of subjective items where a rater's disposition affects how a candidate's performance is judged. The existence of rater bias is inconsistent with fairness and objectivity.

Raw Score—

The number of correct responses or points earned on an examination.

Recertification—

Requirements and procedures established as part of a certification program that certificants must meet to maintain competence and renew their certification. Related to _continuing competence_ and _continuing education_.

Reciprocal Certification—

Reciprocity occurs when a certification program grants its certification to an individual holding a similar certification that has been deemed comparable.

Reliability—

The degree to which the scores and pass/fail outcomes on an examination are replicable or repeatable.

Representative—

The extent to which a sample of individuals contains the same background characteristics as the population it represents. This applies to the panel of subject-matter experts (SMEs) who participate in examination development and the certificants who respond to a survey.

Revocation—

The cancellation of an individual's right to use a certification marking, acronym, and/or designation due to disciplinary action.

Role—

A more specific or narrower set of knowledge and skills than may be encompassed by the term _profession_ or _occupation_. May be the focus of certification for a particular product or service to the public.

Scaled Score—

A raw score that has been transformed so that different forms of the same examination can be reported on a common metric, allowing comparisons of scores across examination administrations.

Score Consistency—

See *reliability*.

Scoring Rubrics—

A set of guidelines for scoring examinations and examination items, including point values, rater instructions (for performance examinations), and how scores are combined and scaled.

Scope—

The definition and extent of the knowledge, skills, and abilities expected of a certificant.

Self-Assessment—

A process by which an assessment is self-administered for the specific purpose of performance feedback rather than a pass/fail decision or certification outcome.

Simulation—

The imitation of the operation of a real-world process or system used" in a performance examination.

Speededness—

When an examination does not provide sufficient time for test takers to complete all of the items. When intentional, both candidate ability and speed of response are important to the examination's purpose. When unintentional, speededness may lead to score bias and detrimentally affect validity.

Stakeholders—

Groups and individuals with an interest in the quality, governance, and operation of a certification program, such as the public, certificants, candidates, employers, customers, clients, and third-party payers.

Standard—

A benchmark of quality that is an accreditation requirement of a certification program submitting an application to the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA).

Standard Error of Measurement—

Estimates how accurate the attained score is in relation to the theoretical "true score."

Standardization—

- **IN THE CONTEXT OF EXAMINATION ADMINISTRATION:** Conducting the examination according to a specified plan to provide the same conditions for all candidates (e.g., seat spacing, lighting).

- **IN THE CONTEXT OF SCORING:** Ensuring that candidate responses are judged using predefined criteria to provide a consistent basis for evaluating all candidates.

Standard Setting—

A systematic method for determining the passing score on an examination based on characteristics of the examination, particularly its level of difficulty. The result of this process is a pass/fail cut score that represents the lowest level of acceptable performance in the content area being assessed by an examination.

Subject-Matter Expert (SME)—

A person with documented expertise in a profession, occupation, role, skill, or specialty area whose input into the development and validation of examination helps to establish validity.

Subjectively Scored Items—

Items that require a degree of judgment from *subject-matter experts (SMEs)* in their scoring. Methods should be applied to ensure that SME judgment is criteria-driven, and not biased.

Subscore—

Scores for *content domains*, *performance domains*, or other *content areas.* Subscores are typically used for candidate feedback, not for determining pass/fail outcomes.

Sufficient Financial Resources—

Having an adequate amount of liquid assets (e.g., cash, debt or equity instruments, and credit lines) available to operate the program effectively.

Sufficiently Reliable—

Levels of reliability that would theoretically result in the same scores and pass/fail outcomes being produced if the examination were to be re-administered to the same candidates under the same conditions. Examination length (i.e., number of items) and candidate heterogeneity affect reliability.

Target Audience—

The group of individuals who can meet or who have met the primary eligibility requirements (vs. alternate pathways) and who are qualified to take an examination or participate in a validation study.

Tasks—

Items in a performance or practical examination or activities or actions conducted while performing one's job. In the latter context, tasks are items in a job/practice analysis that respondents are asked to rate, typically with regard to the frequency, criticality, and/or importance of the tasks.

Technical Report—

A summary of the design, development, and psychometric procedures used to develop and administer the examinations used in a certification program. The report often addresses issues such as job task analysis, validity, item writing, examination development, reliability indices, cut score determination, scoring, and equating.

Third-Party Assessment—

Any assessment that is part of the certification or recertification process that is developed, administered, or managed by any organization other than the certification agency or body.

Time-Limited—

Certification that has a defined beginning and ending date or period beyond which a individual's certification expires unless the individual meets recertification requirements.

Translation—

The process of converting examination items and examination-related text (e.g., instructions) into other languages. Refer also to _adaptation_.

Undue Influence—

Control of decision-making over essential certification policy and procedures by stakeholders or other groups or individuals outside the autonomous governance structure of a certification program.

Validity—

The process and outcome of determining that elements of a certification program are fair and accomplish their intended purpose. Validation is applicable to eligibility requirements, examination content and scoring, and pass/fail outcomes.

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