



Coalition for the Registration
of Exercise Professionals®



VALIDATING CREDENTIALS IN THE FITNESS INDUSTRY

Clarifying the role of accreditation and certification



The fitness industry has rapidly evolved over the past decade. A growing worldwide obesity epidemic along with the heightened cost of healthcare have spurred awareness and scrutiny of preventive interventions, along with its strongly linked contributing factors, physical inactivity and poor dietary practices. Many recognize the opportunity that exists and the need for highly qualified professionals to deliver safe and effective health and fitness services. This requires a consistent qualification validation and professional guardrails to protect the public.

In licensed medical professions, consistency of qualifications is managed at the state-level and usually requires a relevant academic degree and an examination established for the professional role. But in self-regulated professions it is difficult to establish national consistency in workforce development practice. There are often vocational training, post-secondary education or credentialing programs which may or may not be accredited by a third-party for validity of qualification outcomes. And distinguishing training program accreditation from certification program accreditation represents an ongoing challenge because there are similarities, yet meaningful differences in how to interpret these types of recognition. A unifying goal or standard can represent stakeholders of a profession. This is the first step to prevent consumer confusion and establish clear objectives that represent consensus within the profession and the public's best interest. The next step is to identify an acceptable and valid process of qualification recognition within the industry, as well as by external organizations or governmental agencies. The third step is creating transparency so that stakeholders recognize that the actions, policies, and procedures are to support continuous improvement.

PROFESSIONAL PRACTICES AND STANDARDS

Industries vary in how a common standard of practice is defined. The standard established for the fitness and health industries mirrors the level of due care afforded the client or patient receiving the services of a qualified professional. Competencies need to be consistent with the level of care or instruction associated with the services provided. Therefore, the level of scrutiny applied to competency assessment must reflect the minimums identified as requisite for safe and effective practices. Additionally, once a professional is deemed qualified, they must be held accountable to appropriate standards and ethics.

CERTIFICATION VERSUS LICENSURE VERSUS A DEGREE

The terms that describe professional qualifications can create a level of confusion for many stakeholders. In the fitness and health industries, a professional may be required to hold a certification, an academic degree, a license, or all three depending on the scope of the profession. Each of these terms has a different definition and therefore they should not be used interchangeably. Professional certification is most often defined as a voluntary process, the purpose of which is to provide professional recognition of knowledge, technical skills, and capabilities in clinical practice.

Most commonly, a non-governmental agency or association grants professional recognition to an individual who has met certain predetermined qualifications. These qualifications are validated by performance and/or compliance with the requirements of established standards as specified by that agency or association.

Certifications may vary based on the intent of the outcome. Certifications generally fall into one of four classifications: role, domain, modality, and skill. A role certification provides validation of one's qualification as a professional, such as a coach, personal trainer or group exercise instructor, for which the Department of Labor recognizes the profession and where there are established tasks and a defined scope of practice for the profession. This is a relevant statement in that other certifications (domains, modality, skill) exist as an enhancement to the professional role and therefore must be connected to the role certification in an objectively discernable manner – most often based on tasks defined in a role delineation study (RDS) or job task analysis (JTA).

A domain certification is often called a specialty certification and reflects additional knowledge by the professional in one of the content domains for which they were held accountable under their professional role certification. For example, nutrition is a content domain for the personal trainer. Therefore, a nutrition specialty certification denotes an increased level of knowledge or skill within that domain which would be underpinned by the role certification.



Skill certifications involve a particular relevant skill that may require additional practice or needs to be updated with some level of regularity for safety purposes, such as cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR/AED) certification. Skill certifications are often associated with a profession but do not necessarily connect directly to a JTA domain subset or require a role certification to participate in the process.

Of significant concern in the integrity of certification for professional roles is the emergence of assessments that do not reflect appropriate evaluation of competency. For certification to be valid, the certification exam must be constructed in compliance with education standards and scientific rigor so that the assessment measures exactly what it is supposed to measure (validity) and is repeatable (reliability) across a wide population (fair). The assessment tool must match the domain (content area of expertise) and skill set (practical skills) required for successful completion of the task or job.

Valid assessment procedures are attained through multiple steps, starting with a test definition and an expansive job task analysis or role delineation study. The job task analysis (JTA) is used to define the roles and responsibilities of the job. It is first outlined by a group of subject matter experts and then presented to thousands of knowledgeable stakeholders to determine the actual job tasks and the ranking of those tasks in an order of importance. The determinations set the framework, or test blueprint, for the exam. There is a need for many people to be involved so the assessment represents consensus of the profession. Finally, the test must be administered in a controlled, proctored environment. Certification tests that serve as a measure of qualification used for professionals that work with the general public are considered high-stakes and must be controlled for validity, reliability, and fairness.



Many people confuse education and certification because they both have an outcome that represents some level of qualification. Even more confusing is the difference between a certificate and a certification. It has been stated that a certification is a minimum competency assessment based on job-related tasks, knowledge, and skills. A certificate is different, as it confers the completion of an education process much like a diploma. However, because the assessment for the certificate is aligned with a specific curriculum, it may not generalize to industry expectations.

When the term accreditation is applied to a measure of education it can make things more confusing. Because there is regional accreditation for colleges and universities and program accreditation for specific degrees. There are also vocational accreditations and those for distance learning. Earning an online “professional” certificate from an accredited vocational school or organization, for instance, without satisfying the measures of a validly constructed assessment of minimum competency, fails to serve the requirement for public protection. In the fitness industry, some employers recognize the accreditation of certificates in lieu of a validly accredited certification program.

Accreditation by a regional body or those that accredit distance education in place of accredited certification is not consistent with similar professions, such as those in athletic training, dietetics or massage therapy. The Department of Education oversees valid accrediting bodies for education curriculums inclusive of exercise professionals, as defined by the Department of Labor. Interestingly and in accordance with proper procedure, the programmatic accreditation process requires a connection between the knowledge and skill related to the exercise professional role as determined by the JTA performed by the NCCA-accredited certifying organizations. And, while this strengthens the college program’s student learning outcomes, it does not guarantee the student will pass the NCCA-accredited board exam for a professional role.



DETERMINING COMPETENCY FOR A PROFESSIONAL ROLE

Taking an educational course or participating in a discipline-specific curriculum does not necessarily qualify a person for a job or task. Likewise, how the knowledge is attained is irrelevant to the performance of that job or task. An individual may pass a class, but this does not necessarily ensure that he or she has the minimum competencies to do a job. It does suggest that a person is likely to possess these competencies, but does not statistically ensure it. Similarly, tests that are given as part of an education serve as an assessment of the education not necessarily of a particular task or skill set required of a profession. For example, passing a final exam in exercise physiology does not guarantee an ability to screen a participant for exercise or to instruct proper biomechanics when strength training.

What is the role of accreditation in the process of certification? Accreditation is broadly defined as a voluntary, self-regulatory process by which governmental, nongovernmental, voluntary associations or other regulatory bodies grant formal recognition to programs or institutions that meet stated quality criteria. Recognized accreditation is a third party, peer-reviewed process designed to protect the public interest by applying specific standards to the quality of a program or institution. It essentially serves as an external audit. The purpose is to enhance confidence in a product or service to the consumer. In accreditation for certification, the audit looks at the governance of the certification program, the development and administration of the certification exam, the policies and procedures of the organization, and the validity of the recertification expectations.

The benefit of accreditation is twofold. For accreditation of certification programs it benefits the organization by making it perform an internal audit measured against best practices, which helps to streamline operations and identify gaps and weaknesses. The other benefit is to the consumer. The accreditation signifies that the organization has met the minimum qualifications of legitimate practices as they pertain to the particular standards applied and the specific areas reviewed. This way, a consumer can have confidence in engaging in the certification programs that have been reviewed. The key is to realize that only the individual certification programs reviewed have been validated. Organizations do not receive accreditation, but rather the specific credentialing programs are accredited. If an organization offers eight certifications and only one is accredited, it does not mean the other seven programs have undergone the same level of scrutiny. A common unethical practice is to represent unaccredited programs under the accreditation of a completely different credential. An important question to ask is “why is all this necessary for a credential?”

Certifications are not necessary for eligibility for many other jobs, and some uncertified exercise professionals are better than certified ones. The main reason for certification is to instill confidence in consumers that the professionals have at least a minimum competency (or qualification) to perform a job and to provide credible evidence of the credentialed individual's assessed level of competence. Generally, the test development complies with the current version of the Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing co-sponsored by the American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, and National Council on Measurement in Education. The current version of the standards were published in 2014 with the new version anticipated in 2027.

CONCLUSION

This document discusses the key areas of a certification program to assure professional competency for stakeholders' protection, but those aspects serve as a minimum in the broad scope of a professional, standard-setting organization. Credentialing organizations must also consistently demonstrate capable administrative practices and maintain resources to sustain the health of the certification program while serving stakeholders' best interests. This includes both financial and human resources, which means managing economic vitality and recruiting subject matter experts and highly qualified supervisors. All contributing parties should have documented qualifications and experience consistent with measures of expertise.

Strong professions start with principled thought leaders that selflessly engage the labor of industry growth. It starts with attainable and appropriate milestones consistent with acceptable best practices. Continued efforts on a proper path progress the maturation level of the profession to one of respect, autonomy, and social value. The collective efforts must embody the integrity and fortitude necessary to withstand obstacles and challenges so that the outcome is in the best interest of all. Organizations that meet these standards provide goodwill to stakeholders while optimally serving the public good.





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