

Accreditation: Walking the Talk

This article presents case studies of three credentialing sponsors that have sought accreditation by one or more of the accrediting bodies described in the previous article. All three sponsors are in the healthcare field. One has a program that has been accredited by the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA) since 1986. Another has two programs accredited by NCCA, and was also among the first to receive accreditation by the American National Standards Institute (ANSI). A final sponsor was recently awarded accreditation through the American Board of Nursing Specialties (ABNS).

Focusing on each sponsor's experiences with the accreditation process, we asked the sponsors about their reasons for and the benefits of pursuing the accreditation route they followed. We asked them about the demands placed on their organization by the accreditation process, and the challenges of maintaining accreditation. Lastly, we asked what suggestions or words of advice they would offer to other credentialing organizations considering third-party accreditation.

American Board for Certification in Orthotics and Prosthetics

The American Board for Certification in Orthotics and Prosthetics (ABC) Practitioner Program first received accreditation from the NCCA in 1986, when NCCA was known as the National Commission for Health Certifying Agencies. This year, the program is up for its 5-year reaccreditation through NCCA.

Value of NCCA Accreditation

At the time when ABC first sought NCCA accreditation, there were no alternative accreditation programs available to credentialing sponsors. According to Cathy Carter, ABC's Executive Director, the organization has continued to seek reaccreditation through NCCA because, "Having NCCA as an outside review body look at our program keeps us focused on a set of standards that is closely aligned with and helps us to accomplish our mission."

Speaking about the benefits of NCCA accreditation, Carter argues, "We are able to show to the public and our own certificants that our Practitioner certification program has met independent, professional standards. Our test development and administration procedures, our psychometric analyses, and our policies and procedures in general all meet NCCA's stringent standards. It demonstrates our Board's commitment to meeting standards other than those we have set for ourselves—and gains respect for the program."

Challenges of the Accreditation Process

NCCA published a revised set of standards in 2003, and, according to Carter, "NCCA did a great job in seeking stakeholder input and keeping members informed at all stages of the review process, so we had a clear idea of what was coming." With the introduction of the new standards, ABC worked hard to ensure that their policies and procedures continued to comply with the revised standards. In fact, this is an ongoing effort at ABC. As Carter points out, "On a day-to-day basis, we work to ensure that our program meets the intent and the spirit of the NCCA standards—and every program change is carefully considered because it could impact our accreditation through NCCA."

To maintain accreditation, ABC submits an annual report that details, among other things, exam statistics and psychometric analyses. According to Carter, "The annual report keeps you on your toes; it means that the standards are important every year; it keeps you, as an organization, compliant and aware because every year someone wants to know if you are still meeting the standards."

When ABC conducted a new practice analysis in 2000, it led to some changes in the examination process. Carter notes, “NCCA requested additional information to enable them to review what we had done and why. This is the reason that working with a testing partner is so important—PES provided us with all the information we needed to demonstrate our continuing compliance with the standards. It provides an extra level of assurance because you are working with professionals who understand the accreditation process and who uphold the standards in their own work.”

Advice to Others

Asked what advice she would give to others considering accreditation, Carter says, “Accreditation can help increase the visibility and value of your program; it is a way to help you make your programs better and maintain a high degree of professionalism.”

In deciding among alternative routes to accreditation, Carter argues, “Look carefully at the standards of the accrediting body to see how closely aligned they are with your own mission.” She also recommends looking at the list of accredited organizations to see if there is common ground and she suggests considering what else the accrediting body has to offer that may be of benefit to your organization. For ABC, being a member of the National Organization for Competency Assurance (NOCA), NCCA’s parent organization, has been an invaluable resource.

Carter also points out that when choosing a testing partner, certification sponsors should consider whether the testing organization has worked with the accrediting body in the past—Are they familiar with the standards, do they follow the standards in their own work, and what will they do to help your organization maintain compliance with the standards?

National Board for Certification in Occupational Therapy

In 2003, the National Board for Certification in Occupational Therapy (NBCOT), was awarded accreditation by both ANSI and NCCA. NBCOT was among the first certification sponsors to achieve accreditation through the new ANSI program.

Benefits of Dual Accreditation with ANSI and NCCA

According to Paul Grace, NBCOT’s Executive Director, the organization sought accreditation, “to gain third-party review and recognition of the work that we do.” NBCOT applied for dual accreditation, with ANSI because it provides a set of international standards that cross boundaries, and with NCCA because it has been established for longer and at this stage more people are aware of it. Grace says, “There are differences between the two accreditations and we decided to seek both to have a clear demonstration of excellence in the work that we do every day.”

Speaking about the benefits of accreditation, Grace says, “Accreditation demonstrates to both consumers, regulators, and payors that practitioners have gained their certification from an organization—NBCOT—that has demonstrated compliance with established certification industry standards.” In Grace’s view, the NCCA standards are very strong psychometrically, provide due process for candidates, and are better known in the allied health field. However, he argues, “Through the ANSI standards, we are able to educate the community that relies on NBCOT certificants for treatment and services that we are about more than just putting an examination together: we have demonstrated compliance with generally accepted principles of quality management.” The ANSI standards have a strong emphasis on continuous quality improvement management systems.

Lastly, Grace notes, “I’m a firm believer in building moats around an organization to protect against competing organizations that try to market products or services that do not comply with certification industry standards. By seeking accreditation through two different routes, NBCOT has built two moats around itself.”

Demands of the Accreditation Process

As indicated in the previous article, NCCA accredits individual certification programs while ANSI accredits the legal entity. NBCOT's two certification programs—the OCCUPATIONAL THERAPIST REGISTERED OTR® (OTR) and the CERTIFIED OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY ASSISTANT COTA® (COTA)—are both NCCA accredited. Maintaining NCCA accreditation requires an annual report for each program, and according to Grace, “NCCA has very strong criteria that have been developed to ensure accredited programs provide fair, valid, and reliable assessment tools; defined levels of accountability and decision-making; and continuing competency.”

Maintaining ANSI accreditation for NBCOT requires a one-day, on-site visit as well as an annual report. As Grace describes it, “ANSI's on-site evaluators go through each standard with the relevant staff and they observe employees at work to verify that they are following the procedures we submitted for review. It is a terrific learning and sharing experience for NBCOT and for the ANSI auditors as well. ANSI conducts a quality management review, and continuous improvement is the mantra.”

Speaking more generally about accreditation, Grace argues that, “preparation and organization is the key. Organizations need to ensure that they have the processes, procedures, and documentation in place.” He recommends putting together a team of relevant staff to address each individual standard: “This way you distribute the workload, plus you have many eyes looking at each standard and the end-product has ever everyone's thumbprint on it—everyone then has a stake in making the process successful.”

Words of Advice

Asked what advice Grace would give to other organizations about to embark on accreditation, he says, “Give yourself a window of time to get yourself in a position where you are ready to submit an application—probably most organizations will need at least six months.” In addition, he recommends talking to those who have been through the process to get their perspective on the demands and challenges of the accreditation procedures. He also suggests taking time to fully understand the accreditation standards of the accrediting body before embarking on the accreditation process to make sure that the accreditation criteria meet your organization's strategic goals. Lastly, Grace says, “It's easy to become defensive when you are going through accreditation, but try to use it as a learning opportunity: the feedback you receive can only enhance the quality of your program.”

American Board of Perianesthesia Nursing Certification, Inc.

The American Board of Perianesthesia Nursing Certification, Inc. (ABPANC) sponsors two certification programs: the Certified Post Anesthesia Nurse (CPAN®) and the Certified Ambulatory Perianesthesia Nurse (CAPA®). Both programs were newly accredited by the ABNS in 2004 and are due for reaccreditation in 2009. Like NCCA, ABNS accredits individual certification programs.

The Advantages of ABNS Accreditation

Speaking about ABPANC's decision to seek accreditation for its two programs, Karen Niven, ABPANC's Immediate Past President and current Board Director, says, “For us it was a question of walking the talk, practicing what we preach. We were seeking validation of the credential and process that we have created.” According to Niven, ABPANC decided in favor of ABNS accreditation, “because we feel it is an accreditation that is better recognized by the nursing profession—there are a number of other nursing specialties with ABNS accreditation, and ABPANC needed to demonstrate that our programs were of the highest quality.” She adds, “ABPANC's programs are often compared with our competitors' and to be able to say that we are ABNS accredited is a very important marketing tool.”

Niven argues that patients and the public in general are more educated and more aware of what certification means. For her, “Accreditation, then, is another step in validating the expertise and experience of the nurse at the bedside and in assuring the public of quality care and patient safety.” She goes on to say, “It's a great marketing tool; we put it on all our literature and on our website: it's a way for us to articulate the value of the certification we offer; it shows we have met a recognized, platinum standard.”

Requirements of the Accreditation Process

Asked about ABPANC's experiences with the ABNS accreditation process, Niven comments, "The criteria are very stringent. There are 18 standards against which to validate your program, and you have to document evidence for each of these standards." Niven goes on, "It took a lot of time from our CEO, from staff, and from our Board, surveying each component, and finding the supporting data." There was some background data that ABPANC needed to pull together, but as Niven points out, "when we come up for reaccreditation, it will be much easier for us because we know where to find the information." She adds, "The process also underscored the necessity of working closely with the specialty's professional or membership organization to demonstrate compliance with Standards 1 and 2. The membership organization needs to provide specific information, so they should be informed ahead of time about the process and they should be given a timeline."

For ABPANC, accreditation had been on the horizon for some time. According to Niven, "We had been working toward it for a couple of years, which helped us to be able to complete the application process. We looked at the process as a means of conducting an organizational audit—like a self-study, in order to be sure we had all the pieces in place."

Asked about the role of their testing partner, Niven says, "PES worked very closely with us, they helped us in putting together the data we needed for the application, and they have been instrumental in helping us to maintain high standards in the program policies and procedures we implement. Not only did they provide the information specific to the testing process, but they were truly our partner in reading the entire application document and offering valuable suggestions for improvement." She adds, "As part of the accreditation process, ABNS looks for continued growth and improvement in keeping up with new technologies and approaches, and this is something we look to our testing partner for help with."

Suggestions for Others

Asked what suggestions she has for others considering accreditation, Niven says, "Allow plenty of time." She adds, "Take a careful look at the standards of the accrediting organization and incorporate them into your strategic plan before you begin the application process." She continues, "Sponsors should ensure their testing partners know up front what information they will need to provide. Also, sponsors should be knowledgeable about the standards and collect evidence of compliance on an ongoing basis so that when it is time to apply for initial accreditation or reaccreditation, it is an easier process."

In addition, Niven says that it would be very difficult for a volunteer leader to manage the application process, "It really falls on staff to do because it's a lengthy process and there's a lot of detail." Finally, she emphasizes, "Ultimately, seeking accreditation reflects a credentialing organization's commitment to achieving the rigorous standards set by the accrediting body."

For more information about the three accrediting bodies featured in this article, visit their websites at:

NCCA — <http://www.noca.org/ncca/ncca.htm>

ANSI — <http://www.ansi.org>

ABNS — <http://nursingcertification.org>

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