

Third Party Accreditation: Three Accrediting Bodies

As the credentialing environment becomes more competitive, increasing numbers of credential sponsors are turning to third-party accreditation as a means of enhancing the value of the programs they offer. Accreditation serves as a mark of quality, demonstrating to key stakeholders—certificants, employers, and the public—that a credentialing program has met certain stringent standards. It signifies that the program has undergone an in-depth evaluation to determine compliance with those standards.

In this article, we describe the accreditation programs of three distinguished accrediting bodies: the National Commission for Certifying Agencies, the American National Standards Institute, and the American Board of Nursing Specialties. We outline the origins of each accreditation program and the accompanying standards, as well as the eligibility criteria and the accreditation process used. We also ask what sets the program apart and what factors sponsors should consider in deciding which accreditation route to follow.

The National Commission for Certifying Agencies

The National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA) was formally established in 1977 as the National Commission for Health Certifying Agencies (NCHCA). In 1989, the National Organization for Competency Assurance (NOCA), a membership association, was formed and the NCHCA changed its name to the NCCA and became the formal accrediting body of NOCA. As a non-profit organization, NCCA's mission is to "ensure the health, welfare, and safety of the public through the accreditation of certification programs that assess professional competency." More than 170 certification programs are currently accredited by NCCA.

The NCCA Standards

According to Wade Delk, NOCA and NCCA Executive Director, "NCCA serves a public-protection function by assuring, through peer review, that accredited programs meet the standards of excellence established by experts in the certification field." Delk notes that NCCA's standards were established in 1977 and were revised in January 2003, following a comprehensive six-year process of review and revision by hundreds of stakeholders, under the direction of a committee of independent experts. The 21 standards are organized into five main areas:

- Purpose, Governance, and Resources,
- Responsibilities to Stakeholders,
- Assessment Instruments,
- Recertification, and
- Maintaining Accreditation.

A certification program becomes eligible for NCCA accreditation either after one year of administration of the assessment instrument or when at least 500 candidates have been examined with the assessment, whichever comes first.

The Accreditation Process

Asked how the accreditation process works, Delk explains, "NCCA provides detailed directions to help organizations complete the evaluation process. In particular, applicants are required to submit evidence in the form of clear documentation and, if necessary, explanatory comments, demonstrating compliance with each of the standards." This documentation is then reviewed by a body of eleven commissioners, who meet at least three times a year to discuss applications in detail and to make accreditation decisions. Five commissioners are elected by NOCA member organizations with accredited programs, four are appointed psychometricians, one is a public member, and one is appointed to represent non-accredited certification programs.

To maintain accreditation, organizations must submit a detailed report every year for each accredited program, and re-accreditation through the process described above is required every five years.

Distinguishing Features

Asked what makes NCCA's accreditation programs different from others, Delk comments, "NCCA's peer review process is very strong. The collective body of eleven commissioners reviews each application and comes to a group consensus." He adds, "The standards are also very strong psychometrically, with nearly half of them devoted to this area." Delk also stresses that, "The NCCA standards not only determine if a program is doing what it says it is doing, they ensure that the program does what it is supposed to based on best practices as identified by the entire certification industry."

In discussing what factors credentialing organizations should consider in deciding which accreditation route to follow, Delk says, "It really depends on what organizations believe is most appropriate for their field. NCCA is the blue ribbon mark of quality in a certification program: it is a way of demonstrating that a program has achieved a standard of excellence. It also provides a very thorough process of internal audit and review." In addition, Delk emphasizes that NCCA accreditation is required by a large number of state and federal agencies, as well as by many professional organizations.

American National Standards Institute's Personnel Certification Accreditation Program

Beginning in April 2003, the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) began administering an accreditation program for personnel certification agencies, based on the new International Standard ISO/IEC 17024. This standard was also recently adopted as an American National Standard, ANSI/ISO/IEC 17024. ANSI's program follows an internationally recognized process for accrediting organizations that is designed to facilitate global standardization and personnel mobility across countries. Its purpose is to enhance public safety and protect consumers. Unlike NCCA, which accredits *programs*, ANSI accredits the *legal entity* which includes the designated programs or Scope of Accreditation. At present, a total of 38 credentialing organizations are in various stages of the accreditation process under ANSI.

The ISO/IEC 17024 Standard

Roy Swift, ANSI's Program Director, Personnel Certification Accreditation Program, describes the origins of the ISO/IEC 17024 standard as "the product of a worldwide initiative involving 156 different standard-setting bodies, including ANSI, following an established process for developing international standards." Swift points out that many governments adopt the standard specifically because of the comprehensive and rigorous process used to develop it. Officially known as *General Requirements for Bodies Operating Certification of Persons*, the standard is a joint initiative of the International Organization of Standardization (ISO) and the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC).

Certification Organizations are eligible for ANSI accreditation if they meet, and submit documentation of, three basic criteria:

- confirmation of third-party status,
- proof of being a legal entity or part of a legal entity, and
- published defined scope of certification for certifying persons.

Procedures for Accreditation

Swift points out that the accreditation process involves a detailed paper application as well as an on-site visit, which may last from 2 to 7 days depending on the complexity of the program or programs. ANSI uses a three-tier review process: Application materials are first reviewed by two assessors, who also conduct the on-site visit. The assessors then compile a report detailing their findings for a 2 – 3 member review panel, who review the documented evidence to verify the conclusions drawn in the report. Finally, the report is forwarded to a 20-member accreditation committee for voting in a final decision.

Organizations must submit a detailed report every year and undergo a one-day site visit to maintain accreditation. Re-accreditation is required every five years, following the same in-depth review process and on-site visit as for initial accreditation.

Unique Elements

In describing what is unique about ANSI's accreditation process, Swift points to two key elements. "ANSI is the only organization that goes on-site to verify what cannot be seen on paper—no other accreditation program does this." He also notes that, "ANSI's assessors, who undergo five days of training and are required to pass a course-related examination, do not make the final accreditation decision. Rather, they assess the program and pass on their findings to other groups who vote on a final decision." Although not unique to ANSI, Swift emphasizes that the ANSI/ISO/IEC 17024 standard requires that a continuous quality improvement management system be in place, which "can be very beneficial to programs, leading to efficiencies and cost effectiveness."

Asked what factors credentialing organization should consider in evaluating alternative accreditation programs, Swift says, “If the credentialing program is international in scope or if it is moving in that direction, then ANSI accreditation is probably critical. Likewise, if organizations are seeking government approval either at the federal or state level, ANSI is well known and accepted by government agencies.”

American Board of Nursing Specialties

The American Board of Nursing Specialties (ABNS) has been providing accreditation for nursing specialty certification programs since its inception in 1991. Accreditation decisions are made through an autonomous body, the ABNS Accreditation Council. ABNS provides a peer review process for nursing organizations to obtain accreditation for specialty programs by demonstrating compliance with established standards. Like NCCA, ABNS accredits individual certification *programs*. Forty-six programs are currently accredited by ABNS. According to Bonnie Niebuhr, ABNS Chief Executive Officer, “ABNS accreditation serves the public interest by ensuring that specialty certification programs achieve the highest quality standards in the industry.”

ABNS Standards

ABNS’s standards were originally developed in 1991 by a panel of experts in the field of specialty nursing certification. They have undergone several stages of review and revision by experts and other certification stakeholders, resulting in the most current 18 standards published in October 2004. Niebuhr emphasizes, “Three standards relate specifically to the discipline of specialty nursing. They concern the definition and scope of the nursing specialty, the need for a research-based body of knowledge, and eligibility requirements for examination candidates related to licensure, education, and experience.” Both members and non-members of ABNS may apply for accreditation, and a program becomes eligible either once its examination has been administered for a full year, or once 200 candidates have taken the test, whichever comes first.

How Accreditation Works

Niebuhr describes the accreditation process as a “self-study, in which the applicant organization assesses its certification program in a comprehensive program narrative and documents evidence of compliance with ABNS’s standards.” Submitted materials are reviewed in detail by an Accreditation Council Review Team, which makes recommendations to the voting members of the ABNS Accreditation Council. Approval from two thirds of the voting members is required for accreditation.

Organizations with accredited certification programs are required to submit a report annually, confirming continuing compliance with the standards. Re-accreditation, following the accreditation process outlined above, is required every five years.

Distinct Characteristics

In discussing what is distinct about the ABNS program, Niebuhr says, “Clearly ABNS accreditation was developed to meet the very particular needs of nursing specialty certification programs, and three of the standards pertain directly to this. The benefits of nursing-specific standards include helping to organize, strengthen, and distinguish nursing from other professional communities.” On a more general level, Niebuhr notes that “the program requires certification organizations to have a continuous quality improvement process in place—a feature not found in all accreditation programs.”

As certification sponsors evaluate which accreditation route to follow, Niebuhr argues that “for nursing specialty certification programs, ABNS is well known and highly regarded. In addition, as many hospitals seek accreditation, one of the factors that are considered is the percentage of certified nurses employed, and whether or not the certification programs that award the credentials are themselves accredited.” Niebuhr also points to the benefits of “being connected to the broader nursing community through ABNS, which provides organizations with valuable educational resources and networking opportunities.”

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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