

# FAQ: Accreditation of Certification Programs

**A**s you know, the American Council on Exercise (ACE) continues to lead efforts to protect the public from unqualified fitness professionals and is one of only two certifying agencies accredited by the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA).

Since IHRSA's recommendation that club owners only hire personal trainers with certifications from agencies accredited through NCCA or an equivalent accrediting organization, there have been many questions within our industry in regard to education, certification, accreditation and licensure.

We have put together a list of frequently asked questions to help clarify some of these issues.

## 1) What is the difference between education, certification (credentialing) and continuing education?

### Education:

- Teaches foundational knowledge and skills and measures the cognitive retention of the student.
- Many fields require that education be completed in the form of a degree as a prerequisite for the professional credential.

### Certification (Credentialing):

- Measures, in a standardized and unbiased manner, the ability of the candidate to apply the knowledge and skills in the role of a professional.
- Passing a certification establishes that the individual is minimally competent to work unsupervised in a given field or profession.
- Certification does not mean that an individual knows everything required to be considered an expert in a given field.

### Continuing Education:

- Keeps the professional current by updating their knowledge base and teaching them new skills.
- Frequently is associated with the development of a specialty.
- May also be based on a specific modality or tool.
- Assumes that the individual participating possesses all of the foundational knowledge required of the minimally competent professional.
- Generally does not meet the threshold for credible certification for exam content, structure and administration.

## 2) Are all certifications really certifications?

In the fitness industry the term certification has been incorrectly applied to many continuing education courses based on the definition of certification. Most courses provide either foundational education or continuing education content.

## 3) If a course isn't really a certification, why should a professional take it?

Just because a course is a foundational education or continuing education course does not make it less valuable to the fitness professional than a certification, merely that a certificate of completion or specialty certificate would be a more appropriate designation.

## 4) Why accreditation?

Accreditation of certification organizations is a topic of much discussion in the fitness industry which has its roots in the recommendation from the International Health, Racquet and Sportsclub Association (IHRSA) Board of Directors to its membership on qualifications for personal trainers.

### The IHRSA Board's Resolution:

"Whereas, given the increasing importance personal training plays in health, fitness and sports clubs, IHRSA recommends that, as of December 31, 2005, member clubs hire personal trainers who hold at least one current certification from a certifying organization/agency that has obtained third-party accreditation of its certification procedures and protocols from an independent, experienced, and nationally recognized accrediting body.

Furthermore, given the twenty-six year history of the National Organization for Competency Assurance (NOCA) in establishing quality standards for certifying agencies, IHRSA has identified the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA), the accreditation body of NOCA, as being an acceptable accrediting organization. Other equivalent accrediting organizations may be recognized as well, as they come to IHRSA's attention."

## 5) What does the NCCA look for when accrediting certification organizations?

The NCCA evaluates the processes and

systems used by an organization to identify professional role and scope of practice, develop exam content, and provide proper exam administration and scoring to ensure the following:

- That the examination process is fair and unbiased
- That the examination accurately measures the minimal competence of the candidate for the profession
- That the public is protected from unqualified or ineffective practitioners
- That the organization has the means to support its professionals

## 6) Are there other accrediting organizations that are "equivalent" to NCCA?

The only other organization for possible consideration as a credible accreditation organization for certifying agencies is ANSI [www.ansi.org](http://www.ansi.org) based on their long history of setting well-recognized and widely accepted industrial and workplace safety and quality standards.

### Information on Accreditation of Certification Programs:

**Certification** is usually a voluntary process instituted by a nongovernmental agency in which individuals are recognized for acquired knowledge and skill. It requires assessment, including testing, and an evaluation of education and/or experience. In some instances, individuals who seek certification may already hold a license. Also, certification may be non-voluntary for some professions (i.e., required by the profession) and may be considered the equivalent of a license to practice (e.g., EMTs, nurses, athletic trainers, occupational therapists, etc).

**Licensure** refers to a mandatory governmental requirement that restricts the practice in a particular profession. It also requires assessment, including testing, and an evaluation of education and/or experience. Licensure implies both practice protection and

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title protection, in that only individuals who hold a license are permitted to practice and to use a particular title.

NCCA is an independent nongovernmental agency that accredits professional certifications in a variety of professions. NCCA reviews the certification organization's procedures, protocols and operations and determines if the certification properly discriminates between those who are qualified and those who are not qualified to be awarded the respective credential. The following is a sample of the 21 standards that a certification organization must comply with to be awarded NCCA accreditation:

- Conduct certification activities in a manner that upholds standards for competent practice in a profession, occupation, role, or skill.
- Include individuals from the certified population on the certification board or governing committee of the certification program.
- Establish, publish, apply, and periodically review key certification policies and procedures concerning existing and prospective certificants.
- Employ assessment instruments that are derived from the job/practice analysis and that are consistent with generally accepted psychometric principles.
- Develop and adhere to appropriate, standardized, and secure procedures for the development and administration of the assessment instruments.
- Set the cut score consistent with the purpose of the credential and the established standard of competence for the profession, occupation, role, or skill.
- Award certification only after the knowledge and/or skill of individual applicants have been evaluated and determined to be acceptable.
- Establish and apply policies and procedures for secure retention of assessment results and scores of all candidates.
- Demonstrate that its recertification requirements measure or enhance the continued competence of certificants.

\*Note that the NCCA accredits certification programs and NOT education programs. Therefore, to avoid conflicts of interest between certification and education functions, the NCCA requires that the certification agency must NOT also be responsible for accreditation of educational or training programs or courses of study leading to the certification (see [www.noca.org](http://www.noca.org)).

## 7) What will the adoption of the NCCA accreditation standard mean to me as a fitness professional?

- Accreditation of a credentialing organization

by the NCCA is the standard for a large majority of well-respected allied health care professionals and other professions (e.g., nursing, nutrition, athletic training, etc.).

- By earning an NCCA-accredited certification, fitness professionals demonstrate that they are qualified to take a legitimate place on the healthcare continuum based on what is usual and customary for healthcare and other professionals which is critical for developing an appropriate level of professional recognition which should also positively impact compensation levels for fitness professionals.
- For education providers in the fitness industry it means selecting the aspect (education, credentialing or continuing education) that best fits the organizational and business structure of their organization. It does not mean that there are not opportunities for growth or that they do not provide an essential and valuable service to the fitness industry. Certification is the "hardware" of the fitness business, education is the "software."

## 8) Does NCCA Accreditation Mean ACE-certified Professionals Have to Re-sit for the ACE Exam?

The issue of accreditation for certification organizations by the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA) is one that has generated a significant amount of coverage and discussion within the fitness industry press, and among education providers and the fitness professionals that we collectively serve. The concept of "grandfathering" of an organization's fitness professionals following accreditation has become one of the key issues among those discussions.

Because the American Council on Exercise has always utilized an appropriate and NCCA-recognized process to develop and administer its certification examinations, all ACE professionals regardless of when they earned their ACE certification (even if it was earned prior to our NCCA accreditation date of Aug. 2003) are not required to re-sit for certification.

## 9) Do we need a national board exam for fitness professionals?

The current proposal for a national board exam is based on the false assumption that there are no credible national standards for fitness certification today and that a national board exam is the precursor to licensure for fitness professionals. In fact, NCCA accreditation is the recognized standard for professional credentialing and licensing exam organization in the allied healthcare

and other skilled professional fields. Any new credentialing organization would still need to earn NCCA accreditation which would take a minimum of two years following the introduction of their testing instrument (exam).

## 10) Is licensure coming to the fitness industry?

The call for licensure is typically driven by two factors:

1. Failure of an industry to provide for significant self-regulation.
2. A significant risk to public health that requires government intervention. The determination that licensure is required is made through a process called a "sunrise review" that determines the qualifications, skills and knowledge required to work in the proposed licensed profession, and if there are any existing recognized certification standards in the field (usually an NCCA-accredited organization or organizations). Currently, only Louisiana (with its licensure for Clinical Exercise Physiologist) has legislation regarding licensure and the fitness industry.

## 11) Would licensure be beneficial for fitness professionals?

Licensure does not necessarily ensure that the fitness professional will see an increase in compensation or professional recognition. The suggestion that a national board and/or licensure is the key to creating relationships with the medical community and lead to possible insurance reimbursement for fitness professionals is greatly exaggerated. In fact, there may be unintended consequences associated with pro-actively pursuing licensure. Some of the unintended consequences of pursuing licensure could include:

- A limitation of the scope of practice via legislation by well-meaning legislators influenced by lobbyists from various interested parties.
- Additional and unnecessary expenses associated with licensure.
- Alerting the public and the government to a purported "risk" of working with qualified fitness professionals that does not exist.

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