

Examining Professional Certification

HRD practitioners continue to wrestle with the certification question.

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Professional certification is a voluntary process by which professional associations or organizations measure the competencies of individual practitioners. Certification should not be confused with the accreditation or licensure process. While each attempts to regulate the measurement of competencies, the methodology, population, and purposes of regulation differ. Because of these distinctions, accreditation, certification, and licensure should not be used synonymously. However, these terms frequently are used interchangeably by practitioners, leading to the increased confusion and application of each.

Bratton and Hildebrand provide the following distinctions and definitions of accreditation, certification, and licensure:¹

■ **Accreditation**—the process whereby an agency or association grants public recognition to a school, college, or university, or specialized study program that meets certain predetermined qualifications or standards.

■ **Certification**—the process by which a professional organization or an independent external agency recognizes the competence of individual practitioners.

■ **Licensure**—a mandatory legal requirement for certain professions in order to protect the public from incompetent practitioners. Licensing procedures are generally established or implemented by a political governing body that prescribes practice without a license.

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Certification measures competencies of individual practitioners while accreditation evaluates instructional programs. Both of these processes are voluntary; institutions can function without accreditation and individuals can practice in their profession without certification. Regulation of accreditation and certification are administered by professional associations and/or external agencies.

In some professions, individuals cannot practice without a license. Licensure is a mandatory process administered by a political body with its primary purpose being to protect the public from incompetent practitioners. The similarity between licensure and certification is that the recipient of the credential is the individual, not the program.

That accreditation, certification, and licensure are sometimes used, interchangeably presents another problem, as cited by Penland:² "Definitions become a staggering problem. To some professionals certification may appear to be combined with accreditation; for instance, program certification may exhibit some of the processes and other semblances of accreditation causing some educational professionals to believe certification and accreditation are one and the same. Besides, the term *certification* has been used as a catchall phrase for a number of different processes that apply to 'credentialing' of institutions and individuals. The fuzziness of definition has resulted in misunderstanding and frustration on the part of those concerned with the topic and has impeded communication."

Implications for HRD

Although professional certification holds as its primary purpose the promotion of

competencies, other purposes have been identified.

- to promote professionalism
- to encourage individuals to remain in the profession
- to enhance the prestige of the profession
- to avoid external governmental regulations
- to improve academic programs
- to stabilize individual's job security
- to be an income producer
- to protect clients/employers from incompetent practitioners
- to distinguish individuals from peers and colleagues
- to prevent cannibalism (the recruitment of individuals from other professional associations in order to strengthen one's own)

A critical overview of the implications of professional certification will enable HRD practitioners to analyze and understand its positive and negative effects. There are two primary implications of professional certification as well as several secondary ones that could affect the field of HRD.

In a recent study, 97 percent of the 70 professional associations surveyed agreed that identification and improvement of professional competencies of HRD is certification's primary purpose.³ In addition, 76 percent of the associations indicated that professional competencies were developed prior to the implementation of their certification program. Also, 54 percent of the associations reported that professional competencies were improved or refined as a result of their certification efforts. Bratton lists six ways that competencies help by providing the practitioner and the profession with:⁴

- a tool for self-assessment and professional growth;
- a common set of concepts and vocabulary which will improve communication among professionals and other professional groups;
- academic and professional preparation programs with information for program development;
- a basis for a potential certification program;
- an aid to help employers identify qualified applicants;
- a basis for defining an emerging field of study.

Competencies should reflect the skill of a professional regardless of his or her position, title, or academic degree. In addition, competencies should be performance oriented rather than academically oriented. The competencies should also reflect the skills of experienced practitioners.

tioners as opposed to entry-level individuals.

The second primary implication concerns the enhancement of the profession. According to Scheer, one fundamental characteristic of a profession is the measurement of proficiency before an individual can achieve professional status.⁵ In addition, the evolution of a profession consists of several developmental stages. According to Whyte and Warzynski and Noble, the establishment of entry requirements based on experience or a combination of experiences and qualifications are mandatory for a vocation to be considered a profession.^{6,7} Both the characteristics and the developmental process of a profession require that certification be instituted.

Other secondary implications for HRD exist. Professional certification can serve as a feedback mechanism for academic curricular design. In addition, professional certification allows the public and profession to make some distinctions between HRD practitioners who are qualified and those who are not. The encouragement and recognition of some higher professional achievement standard as well as the provision for prestige and possible increased earning power for the practitioner are also implied. Professional certification provides for standardization of the profession and the establishment of credibility for practitioners.

St. John provided an overview summary related to the implications of professional certification:⁸ "The benefits of certification programs are substantial for the individuals concerned, their employers and society. . . . Regardless of the value of the designation itself, candidates are required to increase their own knowledge and ability in their field of endeavor. It is in the preparation for certification that its greatest benefit is realized. This emphasis on self improvement and education is satisfying to the individual, valuable to his employer, and ultimately increases the quality of product and services to everyone."

Although professional certification has numerous positive implications for HRD, negative consequences can be cited. Professional certification, though well intended, may cause division among HRD practitioners. This could fragment a field already diverse and suffering from an identity problem.

A second negative concerns the identification of competencies for HRD practitioners. Because of the extreme diversity of practitioners in HRD, the task of identifying, defining, and measuring competencies for each becomes an almost im-

possible chore. In addition, developing an appropriate level for each identified competency continues to add confusion to the issue of applicant evaluation. Determination of who in the profession can establish the measurable standards by which to evaluate applicants increases the complexity of the professional certification process. Finally, selecting appropriate and comprehensive qualification criteria requires an awareness of the whole field of HRD which few practitioners possess.

Other effects of professional certification can be found in the areas of financial and human costs, legal implications, membership restrictions, and inadequate regulation of the profession. Professional certification can be costly in the early stages of its development. These costs come with the recruitment and selection of qualified certification specialists, and with test construction and design, which includes reliability and validity studies, administrative costs, maintenance costs, and the promotion of the certification program. Professional certification programs are almost totally financed by the sponsoring professional association. The legal ramifications concerning professional certification indicate that an association cannot require nonmembers to join their association before issuing certification.⁹ Associations that fail to comply with this ruling are discriminating on the basis of membership status and are violating federal law.

Professional certification is seen as a "gatekeeping" activity severely limiting the entry of qualified professionals—thus increasing the responsibilities of current practitioners to carry out the mission of HRD. Restricting the entry of practitioners may not improve the quality of the profession.

The final negative implication is the possibility of inadequate regulation or control of the profession. Professional certification requires that the sponsoring association be in a position to control or affect the profession. But because of the diversity of HRD, this may not be feasible. If certification is to be analyzed critically, the following questions need to be addressed by HRD professionals:

- Should a survey of HRD practitioners be conducted before initiating a certification program?
- Should there be different levels of certification?
- Should nonmembers be allowed to obtain certification status?
- Who will determine the list of professional competencies for adult education?
- Who will establish the measurable stan-

dards by which applicants are evaluated?

- How will the certification program be administered?
- How will the development of the certification program be supported financially?
- Should a continuous promotional program be established to create and maintain enthusiasm for certification?
- Should "grandfathering" be allowed?
- Should a formal examination of applicants be required?
- Should recertification and continuing education of applicants be required?
- Should certification status be revoked for illegal or unethical behavior?
- What qualification criteria should be used in evaluating applicants for certification?

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