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Assessment-based certificates and professional certifications

An evaluation of the primary differences

As discussed in the January/February 2014 *CMA Today*, the Continuing Education Board (CEB) of the American Association of Medical Assistants (AAMA) developed the Assessment-Based Recognition in Order Entry (ABR-OE) for individuals who have never been CMAs (AAMA) and who are not eligible for the CMA (AAMA) Certification Examination. The ABR-OE is an assessment-based certificate (ABC), not a professional certification, such as the CMA (AAMA). Currently, the CEB is creating an ABC in Geriatrics (ABC-G) for CMAs (AAMA).

The purpose of this article is to explain the differences between assessment-based certificates and professional certifications. The document *Defining Features of Quality*

*Certification and Assessment-Based Certificate Programs*¹ of the Institute for Credentialing Excellence (ICE) is the primary source of information for this article.

Definition of an ABC program

An ABC program is a nondegree granting program that has three principal responsibilities:

- (a) provides instruction and training to aid participants in acquiring specific knowledge, skills, and/or competencies associated with intended learning outcomes;
- (b) evaluates participants' achievement of the intended learning outcomes; and
- (c) awards a certificate only to those who meet the performance, proficiency, or passing standard for the assessment.¹

Assessment-based certificates are different from certificates of attendance or participation:

Certificates of attendance or participation are provided to individuals (participants) who have attended or participated in classes, courses, or other education/training programs or events. The certificate awarded at the completion of the program or event signifies that the participant was present and in some cases that the participant actively participated in the program or event. Demonstration of accomplishment of the intended learning outcomes by participants is *not* a requirement for receiving the certificate; thus, possession of a certificate of attendance or participation does not indicate that the intended learning outcomes have been accomplished by the participant.¹

Definition of professional certification

Professional certifications demonstrate competencies and grant a time-limited credential:

Professional or personnel certification is a voluntary process by which individuals are evaluated against predetermined standards for knowledge, skills, or competencies. Participants who demonstrate that they meet the standards by successfully completing the assessment process are granted a time-limited credential. To retain the credential, certificants must maintain continued competence. The credential awarded by the certification program provider denotes that the participant possesses particular knowledge, skills, or competencies.¹

Primary focus of an ABC program

The primary focus of an ABC program is on facilitating the accomplishment of intended learning outcomes:

Although assessment is an integral part of the certificate program, the primary purpose of the program is to provide education and training which supports the accomplishment of the intended learning outcomes.¹

Primary focus of a certification program

Demonstration of professional competence is the hallmark of a certification program:

The primary focus of a professional/personnel certification program is on providing an independent assessment of the knowledge, skills, and/or competencies required for competent performance of an occupational or professional role or specific work-related tasks and responsibilities. ... The certification awarded designates that participants have demonstrated the requisite, work-related knowledge, skills, or competencies and met other requirements established by the certification program provider.¹

Assessment in an ABC program

For an ABC program, assessment methods are less standardized:

Summative (end-of-program) assessment is used to evaluate participants' accomplishment of the intended learning outcomes and

generally takes place at the completion of the education/training component of the program. Any generally accepted assessment method may be utilized for conducting the summative assessment.¹

Assessment in a certification program

Certification programs require standardized, secured assessment methods:

The purpose of the assessment process is to evaluate mastery of the knowledge, skills, or competencies required for certification ... The assessment takes place after the participant has had the opportunity to acquire the targeted knowledge, skills, or competencies. The assessment is conducted in a standardized manner in a secure, proctored environment. Successful completion of the assessment is required to receive the certification.¹

Validation of an ABC program

The requirements for validating content in an ABC program are guided by qualified individuals:

The process of validating the content of the assessment includes, at a minimum, documentation of the link between the intended learning outcomes and the assessment ... The assessment content is periodically revised, as needed, by subject-matter experts and qualified individuals to ensure that it continues to reflect the scope and purpose of the program and remains aligned with the education/training and the intended learning outcomes.¹

Validation of a certification program

The requirements for validating content in a certification program are guided by occupational studies:

(a) a formal study (e.g., job/practice analysis, role delineation) conducted in accordance with generally accepted practice; and

(b) documentation of the link between the study findings and the knowledge, skills, and competencies represented on the assessment.

The assessment content is periodically revised, as needed, based on the finding of a formal job/practice analysis or role delin-

ation process to ensure that it continues to reflect current occupational or professional practice.¹

Identification of individuals with an ABC

Individuals who have been awarded an ABC "are *not* awarded an acronym or letters for use after their names upon completion of the certificate program."¹

Identification of individuals with a certification

"Certificants are awarded an acronym or letters for use after their names to signify that they have obtained and maintained the credential."¹

In conclusion, the ABR-OE and the forthcoming ABC-G are assessment-based certificates issued by the CEB of the AAMA. Individuals who are granted an ABR-OE receive a letter of recognition, and completers of the forthcoming ABC-G will receive a certificate of completion. They are not permitted to put initials after their names.

The CMA (AAMA) is a professional certification issued by the Certifying Board of the AAMA. To maintain currency, CMAs (AAMA) must recertify every 60 months by continuing education or re-examination. Only individuals holding a current CMA (AAMA) are permitted to put these initials after their names. ♦

Questions? Contact Donald A. Balasa, JD, MBA, at dbalasa@aama-ntl.org, or call 800/228-2262.

Reference

1. Institute for Credentialing Excellence. *Defining Features of Quality Certification and Assessment-Based Certificate Programs*. https://www.acfchefs.org/download/documents/certify/certification/certification_vs_certificate.pdf. Accessed January 18, 2017.