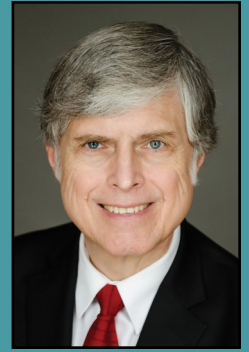


# Outcomes Measures for the Accreditation of Education Programs and the Significance of NCCA Accreditation of Certification Programs in the Occupation/Profession



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There continues to be an increasing emphasis on requiring academic programs that are preparing students for an occupation/profession to demonstrate by student outcomes measures the effectiveness of their education. For occupations that are not licensed, the performance by students on national certification exams is often required by accrediting bodies that accredit occupational education programs.

However, a fundamental misunderstanding about using the results of certification exams for student outcomes measures has become the conventional wisdom in certain accreditation schools of thought. The purpose of this article is to examine what I consider this fundamental understanding and offer some clarifications and refinements in the appropriate use of certification exam results as a student outcomes measure.

## The Accreditation of Certification Programs/Exams

Occupational certification programs and their exams may most frequently be accredited under two accreditation standards. One standard is the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA) *Standards for the Accreditation of Certification Programs*<sup>1</sup> (NCCA *Standards*). The other standard is ISO/IEC 17024:2026: *Conformity Assessment—General Requirements for Bodies Operating Certification of Persons*<sup>2</sup> (ISO 17024). (“ISO” is the abbreviation for “International Organization for Standardization.”)

The accreditation of certification programs and their exams is different from (1)

the institutional accreditation of schools and (2) the programmatic accreditation of programs of study for occupations/professions within schools.

In this paper I will be focusing mostly on accreditation under the NCCA *Standards*.

## NCCA Accreditation

The NCCA describes its accreditation in its current *Standards*:

Accreditation is both a process and a status. The NCCA’s accreditation process uses peer review to evaluate a certification program’s compliance with these standards, recognizes programs that demonstrate compliance, and serves as a resource on certification quality. NCCA *Standards* address the structure and governance of the certifying agency; the characteristics of the certification program; the information required to be available to applicants, certificants, and the public; and the recertification initiatives of the certifying agency. The NCCA’s *Standards for the Accreditation of Certification Programs* used as a foundation the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*, promulgated by the American Psychological Association ... [and other testing and measurement bodies].

As a status, NCCA accreditation recognizes and provides public notification that the certification program is committed to self-study and external review by one’s peers, meets *Standards*, and seeks continuous improvement to maintain the quality of examination and certification of its constituent professionals. Upon achieving accreditation, the certification program must embrace transparency and accountability to its stakeholders, certificants, and the public through communications that are publicly available and readily accessible.<sup>1</sup>

## A Certification Program Purpose

The NCCA *Standards* contain the following:

### Standard 1: Purpose

The purpose of the certification program must be to recognize each individual who meets established criteria. These criteria must uphold standards for practice in a profession, occupation, role, or specialty area.

...

### Commentary:

1. Certification is a type of credential that can be offered for a specific profession, occupation, role, or specialty area across multiple disciplines. Programs should specify the *target population(s)* for certification, including the *level of experience for the targeted practitioner* and the purpose of the certification program.<sup>1</sup> [Emphasis added.]

The above excerpt would seem to indicate that a certification program that is seeking NCCA accreditation may target a segment of an occupation/profession, including a segment of an occupation predicated on the “level of experience”<sup>1</sup> of the segment. This assertion is supported in “Standard 14: Job Analysis”:

### Commentary:

...

2. Programs typically validate the delineated job-related elements by surveying current certificants and/or a representative sample of the population that is the *intended target audience for the certification*.<sup>1</sup> [Emphasis added.]

## Targeting Different Segments/ Subsets

There are examples of certification programs that target one segment/subset of an occupation, and not all segments of an occupation, nor the occupation as a whole.

For example, there are occupations that have training programs at the high-school level and education programs at the postsecondary/post-high-school level. As one would expect, there are often certifications within the occupation that target completers of a secondary program and certifications that target completers of a postsecondary program. *These may be very different exams and certifications, even though they exist within the same occupation broadly defined.* To reiterate, different credentials and designations may be issued to those who pass (1) the exam for completers of high school programs and (2) the postsecondary exam—even though both exams are within the same occupation.

## Examinations Varying in Content Coverage and Difficulty

For occupations that cover a broad range of knowledge, skills, and affective attributes and behaviors, a certifying body for the occupation may choose to create several exams, each of which covers subsets of the universe of knowledge, skills, and affective attributes. If such is the case, the accreditation of a certification program by the NCCA attests to the fact that the certification program has met the *NCCA Standards* in reference to the subset of knowledge, skills, and affective attributes, not in reference to all the occupation's knowledge and skills. Furthermore, based on issues of market positioning and strength of competition, there may be differences in the difficulty of the certification exams offered by a certifying body in a particular occupation broadly defined.

## A Fundamental Misunderstanding, Now the Conventional Wisdom

The fundamental misunderstanding (in my opinion) within academic programmatic accreditation may be described as follows:

If a certification program/exam within an occupation is accredited by the

NCCA (or under *ISO 17024*), the programmatic accreditor is obligated (legally and/or by the standards of the programmatic accreditor) to accept performance on *any and all accredited certification programs* in the occupation broadly defined for measuring the outcomes of its accredited programs.

Certification programs within the same occupation broadly defined may vary significantly, depending on what subset of the knowledge, skills, and affective attributes and behaviors the certification program and its exam purport to measure. Consequently, results on certification exam(s) should be used for student outcomes *only to the extent that the exam(s) measure(s) the knowledge, skills, and affective attributes required by the programmatic accreditor to be included in the curriculum of accredited programs.*

In other words, my conviction is that the performance on certification exams should be used as an outcomes measure for programs and accreditors of programs if and only if the exam measures what is taught in the mandated curriculum of the program. Using the performance on a certification exam that does not measure (or partially or imperfectly measures) the knowledge, skills, and affective attributes taught in accredited programs leads to a flawed measure of student outcomes.

## NCCA Policies Lend Support

The *NCCA Policy Manual*<sup>3</sup> supports my assertion that NCCA accreditation of a certification program/exam does not automatically mean that the certification is a suitable vehicle for measuring student achievement in an academic program in the profession:

### Matters Not Evaluated

The [NCCA] does not evaluate the content of a program's assessment; the [NCCA Standards] are concerned with structure, process, and results.<sup>3</sup>

This brief NCCA policy is indicating that, in its review of certification programs, the NCCA makes sure that the *process* of constructing and administering the certification exam meets its *Standards*. Such a process includes but is not limited to:

- Conducting a psychometrically-sound and legally defensible job task analysis
- Creating a weighted content outline based on the results of the job task analysis
- Writing exam items (i.e., questions) that meet the specifications of the content outline
- Developing exam forms/versions that measure knowledge of the content in each domain/content area of the content outline and that are statistically equated to each other
- Using subject matter experts to establish a psychometrically defensible cut score
- Administering the exam in a manner that minimizes construct-irrelevant variance
- Reviewing the exam results to make sure that each item is performing acceptably

The NCCA does not attempt to “evaluate the content of a [certification] program's assessment”<sup>3</sup> or test to determine *whether the exam is testing what it should be testing.*

Consequently, I maintain, the responsibility of whether a particular exam is suitable for student outcomes measurement rests with the/a programmatic accrediting body of academic programs in the profession, not with the NCCA. ♦

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## References

1. National Commission for Certifying Agencies. *Standards for the Accreditation of Certification Programs*. Revised October 2021.
2. International Organization for Standardization. *ISO/IEC 17024:2026: Conformity Assessment—General Requirements for Bodies Operating Certification of Persons*. March 2026.
3. National Commission for Certifying Agencies. *Policy Manual*. Revised August 13, 2024. Accessed June 17, 2026. [https://www.credentialingexcellence.org/Portals/0/NCCA%20policies%20revised%208\\_13-24\\_1.pdf](https://www.credentialingexcellence.org/Portals/0/NCCA%20policies%20revised%208_13-24_1.pdf)