

## INTRODUCTION

Certification programs are widely used as a means of evaluating and recognizing the competence of individuals in an occupation. When a certification program is of high quality, it is an effective means of ensuring professional competency; however, not all certification programs are of high quality. Accreditation is a means of evaluating the certification program itself, to ensure that the program meets recognized industry standards, in such areas as technical competence, integrity, and impartiality. There are direct benefits to the certification agency for undergoing accreditation, as well as advantages to other stakeholders. Currently, certification programs can seek accreditation through organizations including Buros, NCCA, and ANSI. The process of seeking accreditation is typically rigorous and involves considerable effort; many agencies find it valuable to conduct a pre-audit prior to formally applying for accreditation.

## ASPECTS OF ACCREDITATION

### Advantages of Accreditation

An immediate benefit to a certification agency that seeks accreditation is the valuable internal feedback that it provides. This feedback will address the quality of the processes and procedures that are used, potentially identifying areas where improvement is needed, along with identifying those areas that are already very high quality. Once a certification agency has successfully attained accreditation it also has the advantage of public acknowledgement that its policies and procedures, including those related to test development and administration, meet high standards and stringent requirements. The public acknowledgement of quality provided by accreditation can also strengthen a certification agency's marketing of its services. There are also advantages of accreditation for potential employers and members of the public in terms of making it easier for these stakeholders to identify certified personnel who are truly qualified. A further benefit of accreditation is that it aids regulators in verifying the qualifications of personnel. Finally, individuals who receive certifications from accredited programs may have increased professional mobility, both across state lines and across national boundaries.

### Buros



The Buros Center for Testing, at the University of Nebraska - Lincoln, includes a division that conducts accreditations of proprietary testing programs. This division is known as the Buros Institute for Assessment, Consultation and Outreach (BIACO). The proprietary testing programs seeking accreditation may be educational, psychological, credentialing, or personnel selection programs. The accreditation standards that Buros applies are based on the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* (AERA, APA, NCME, 1999); for proprietary testing programs that include delivery as computer-based tests, Buros also utilizes the *Guidelines for Computer-Based Testing* by the Association of Test Publishers (ATP, 2001). The approach to accreditation that Buros uses occurs in two stages. Stage One is a process accreditation that includes the review of various documents submitted by the exam provider, along with a site visit to the provider's offices. In this stage the general testing practices of an exam provider are evaluated, particularly the organizational structure, test development, test administration, psychometric methods, and security procedures. Once an exam provider has been awarded Stage One accreditation, the organization is eligible to apply for the second stage of accreditation. Stage Two is a *product* accreditation; in this stage the processes and practices associated with specific tests are evaluated, including psychometric properties of the test. The proprietary testing program must agree to abide by policies and procedures established by Buros, which monitors continuing compliance with its standards throughout the accreditation period.

### NCCA

The National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA) is the accreditation body of the National Organization for Competency Assurance (NOCA). The NCCA uses a peer review process to establish accreditation standards, to evaluate organizations in relation to those standards, and to recognize those organizations and programs that satisfy the standards. Unlike the Buros program, the NCCA only accredits personnel certification programs. A certification program is eligible to apply for accreditation either after one year of the administration of the assessment instrument, or after at least 500 candidates have been assessed using the assessment instrument. Many of the allied health organizations that certify personnel and that have sought accreditation, have sought accreditation from NCCA. The first NCCA Standards were issued in the late 1970's; revised Standards were approved in February, 2002. NCCA indicates that its standards exceed the requirements set forth by the *American Psychological Association* and the *U.S. Equal Opportunity Employment Commission*. The NCCA Standards are organized into the five sections of 1.)



purpose, governance, and resources; 2.) responsibilities to stakeholders; 3.) assessment instruments; 4.) recertification; and 5.) maintaining accreditation. As a form of continued monitoring, the accredited organization is required to submit an annual report form attesting to the status of the certification program, throughout the accreditation period.

### ANSI

The American National Standards Institute (ANSI) is the U.S. member of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) and the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC). ANSI administers two accreditation programs for personnel certification agencies. The first of these is used for organizations involved in certifying food safety managers; this program is based on a set of standards derived from the *Conference for Food Protection*. The second accreditation program administered by ANSI is based on the international standard ISO/IEC 17024, *General Requirements for Bodies Operating Certification Systems of Persons*, published in 2003 and recently adopted as an American National Standard which are often adopted by the federal and state governments. This standard is a national, global, voluntary benchmark for personnel certification agencies. In the ANSI process for accreditation, the certification agency must submit documents related to each of the requirements/standards specified in the standard; this is followed by an onsite audit conducted by qualified ANSI-trained assessors. The ANSI process focuses on the entire certification organization, and is designed to provide feedback both in areas that may be highly commendable as well as those where improvements are needed. The accreditation process includes a review of the certification agency's organizational structure, the development and maintenance of the certification program, the assessment tools used initially and for re-certification and the policies and procedures related to documentation, confidentiality, security, and more. The emphasis is on continuous quality improvement. Any nonconformities that are identified during the process must be corrected by the certification agency within a predefined timeframe. A personnel certification agency which is successfully accredited must also submit an annual report for review; and in designated years an on-site visit is required.

### Preparing for Accreditation

Many certification agencies choose to conduct a preliminary review of their certification program prior to applying for accreditation. This type of program audit often focuses on an analysis of the certification program in light of established professional standards, particularly in terms of the organizational structure, policies and procedures, and quality



of the exam itself. This pre-audit phase can often reveal needed program improvements, enabling corrections and enhancements to the certification program, along with thorough and appropriate documentation. Specific aspects of the certification program to be reviewed include the procedures established for candidate eligibility, whether a job analysis has been conducted and then utilized to develop test specifications, whether the exam meets psychometric quality criteria such as validity and reliability, and whether thorough, secured record keeping procedures are in place.

### Summary

When a certification agency receives accreditation from a recognized, impartial, third-party accreditation agency, this confirms that the certification agency is operating according to high standards, and that it is concerned with maintaining that level of quality. Established organizations that offer accreditation to personnel certification agencies include Buros, NCCA, and ANSI. Each of these organizations has its own emphasis and a unique process that it follows in reviewing agencies for accreditation. Regardless of the type of accreditation sought, many certification agencies elect to conduct a pre-audit in preparation for applying for accreditation. This enables the certification agency to ensure that its certification program is qualified for accreditation and is fully prepared to undertake the process. While the process of applying for accreditation is challenging, most agencies that undertake it find it to also be rewarding, both due to the program improvements it supports and to the enhanced program visibility that results.

