



Standard Practice for Certificate Programs¹

This standard is issued under the fixed designation E2659; the number immediately following the designation indicates the year of original adoption or, in the case of revision, the year of last revision. A number in parentheses indicates the year of last reapproval. A superscript epsilon (ϵ) indicates an editorial change since the last revision or reapproval.

^{ε1} NOTE—Editorial corrections were made throughout in February 2010.

1. Scope

1.1 This practice provides guidance to certificate issuers for developing and administering quality certificate programs and to stakeholders for determining the quality of certificate programs.

1.2 This practice includes requirements for both the entity issuing the certificate and requirements for the specific certificate programs for which it issues certificates.

1.3 This practice provides the foundation for the recognition or accreditation or both of a specific entity to issue a specific certificate or certificates to individuals after successful completion of a certificate program.

1.4 This practice does not address guidance pertaining to certification of individuals nor does it address guidance pertaining to education or training programs in general, including those that issue certificates of participation or certificates of attendance.

2. Referenced Documents

2.1 ANSI/IACET Standard:

[ANSI/IACET 1-2007 Standard for Continuing Education and Training](#)^{2,3}

2.2 ANSI/ISO/IEC Standard:

[ANSI/ISO/IEC 17024:2003 Conformity Assessment—General Requirements for Bodies Operating Certification of Personnel](#)^{4,5}

¹ This practice is under the jurisdiction of ASTM Committee E36 on Accreditation & Certification and is the direct responsibility of Subcommittee E36.30 on Personnel Certificate Programs.

Current edition approved April 1, 2009. Published April 2009. DOI: 10.1520/E2659-09E01.

² Available from the International Association for Continuing Education and Training (IACET), 1760 Old Meadow Rd., Suite 500, McLean, VA 22102, <http://www.iacet.org>.

³ ANSI/IACET 1-2007 is a valuable document with detailed guidance for all providers of continuing education and training. It provides a descriptive framework to assist organizations in adhering to quality practices for all types of continuing education and training programs. In contrast, this practice outlines a framework of quality for one specific type of program, the certificate program.

⁴ Available from American National Standards Institute (ANSI), 25 W. 43rd St., 4th Floor, New York, NY 10036, <http://www.ansi.org>.

3. Terminology

3.1 *Definitions*—For the purposes of this practice, the following apply.

3.1.1 *appeal, n*—written request made to the certificate issuer by a primary stakeholder for reconsideration of any adverse decision made by the certificate issuer related to the certificate program requisites or certificate program process.

3.1.2 *assessment, n*—instrument or method used to measure learner attainment of intended learning outcomes (including but not limited to oral or written tests, skill demonstrations, portfolios, or work products).

3.1.3 *certificate, n*—document (letter, card, or other medium) awarded to certificate holders that designates the successful completion of a certificate program's requisites.

3.1.4 *certificate holder, n*—individual who has been issued a certificate after successfully meeting a certificate program's requisites.

3.1.5 *certificate issuer, n*—legal business entity or government agency, or operating unit thereof, that has ultimate responsibility for administering a certificate program and issuing certificates to individuals successfully meeting certificate program requisites.

3.1.6 *certificate program, n*—nondegree-granting education or training program consisting of (1) a learning event or series of events designed to educate or train individuals to achieve specified learning outcomes within a defined scope, and (2) a system designed to ensure individuals receive a certificate only after verification of successful completion of all program requisites including but not limited to an assessment of learner attainment of intended learning outcomes.

3.1.7 *certificate program plan, n*—documented plan by which the certificate issuer develops and administers the certificate program, including the essential elements of analysis, program design, development, implementation, and evaluation.

⁵ ANSI/ISO/IEC 17024:2003 serves as a valuable standard document providing a framework of quality for personnel certification programs. In contrast, this practice serves as a framework of quality for certificate programs.

3.1.8 *certificate program process*, *n*—all activities by which the certificate issuer establishes that a person fulfills specified requisites to earn the certificate, including but not limited to prerequisites (if applicable), completion of a learning event or events, the learner assessment(s), and the certificate decision.

3.1.9 *certificate program requisites*, *n*—specific requirements of the certificate program that certificate holders shall meet before being issued the certificate including but not limited to the essential element of the assessment of learner attainment of intended learning outcomes.

3.1.10 *certificate program scope*, *n*—specific range of competencies, procedures, actions, or processes covered by a certificate program.

3.1.11 *complaint*, *n*—request, other than an appeal, made to a certificate issuer for corrective action relating to the activities of that issuer or regarding its certificate holders.

3.1.12 *confidentiality*, *n*—ability to ensure that information is accessible only to those authorized to have access.

3.1.13 *criterion-referenced method*, *n*—approach to determining a passing standard for a learner assessment based on subject matter expert-identified performance standards and not based on the performance of other students.

3.1.14 *designation*, *n*—title or trademarked label that a certificate holder is granted to use.

3.1.15 *designation acronym*, *n*—abbreviated title, usually the acronym form of the designation, which a certificate holder is granted to use.

3.1.16 *document control*, *n*—process addressing how documents are created, approved, revised and reapproved, and distributed and how obsolete document use is prevented.

3.1.17 *intended learning outcomes*, *n*—statement of what learners are expected to know or be able to do as a result of the certificate program’s learning event or program (recognizing that actual learning outcomes may or may not be those intended).

3.1.18 *internal audit*, *n*—first-party review of the certificate issuer’s policies and procedures to ensure adherence to this practice’s requirements.

3.1.19 *learning event*, *n*—combination of learning experiences designed to assess a learner’s understanding of content or his/her ability to perform a skill or set of skills that satisfies a set of learning objectives/outcomes. This event can be accomplished by any media sufficient to achieve the learning outcomes, including but not limited to, classroom instruction, distance-learning course, blended-learning activities, conferences, and satellite transmissions. **ANSI/IACET 1-2007**

3.1.20 *learning experience*, *n*—single instance of learning obtained during a learning event that demonstrates a specific learning objective or learning outcome. This could include solving a problem, completing a case study, completing a quiz, or applying a skill. **ANSI/IACET 1-2007**

3.1.21 *oversight group*, *n*—group of the certificate program’s primary stakeholders formed to develop, monitor, and approve the certificate program plan.

3.1.22 *primary stakeholders*, *n*—persons, groups, or organizations, or combination thereof, for which the certificate program is targeted or for which intended outcomes are directed or both.

3.1.23 *privacy*, *n*—ability of individuals to control access to themselves or information about themselves and thereby reveal themselves selectively.

3.1.24 *records control*, *n*—process addressing which and how records are kept, by whom, for how long, and how they are disposed.

3.1.25 *stakeholder*, *n*—any person, group, or organization with an interest in, or who may be affected by, the certificate program.

3.1.26 *term of validity*, *n*—length of time for which the issued certificate is considered valid (that is, the content is current and relevant).

3.1.27 *training and education industry generally accepted practices*, *n*—those practices that are regularly defined and cited in the training and education industry professional literature and standards.

4. Significance and Use

4.1 Certificate programs are typically offered by community colleges and universities, government agencies, employers, independent for-profit training organizations, and professional and trade associations. While quality guidelines do exist for continuing education and training providers in general (for example, ANSI/IACET 1-2007) and for entities offering personnel certification programs (for example, ANSI/ISO/IEC 17024:2003), currently, no quality guidelines exist specifically to aid entities offering certificate programs. This practice aims to change that and has been developed to:

4.1.1 Provide certificate program developers and certificate issuers guidelines for quality program development and administration;

4.1.2 Form the foundation for a recognition or accreditation system or both that enable consumers, employers, government agencies, and others who rely upon a skilled workforce to distinguish between qualified workers and those with fraudulent or less-than-quality credentials;

4.1.3 Assist stakeholders in differentiating between certificate programs from personnel certification; and

4.1.4 Assist stakeholders in differentiating certificate programs from other programs that confer certificates, including but not limited to certificates of attendance or certificates of participation.

4.2 Currently, it is challenging to distinguish a certificate earned through the focused learning and assessment offered through a certificate program from one granted through other means. That a certificate is issued is not a distinguishing factor. The word “certificate” is used broadly as a document awarded to designate the attainment or completion of something. An individual might receive a certificate from an education or training provider as verification of attendance at a learning event (often called a certificate of attendance) or receive a certificate as verification of active participation in a learning event’s learning experiences (often called a certificate of

participation). The distribution of a certificate, however, does not indicate that the education or training program completed was a certificate program. In a certificate program, an individual participates in a learning event or series of events designed to assist him or her in achieving specified learning outcomes within a defined scope; the individual receives a certificate only after verification of successful completion of all program requisites including but not limited to an assessment of learner attainment of intended learning outcomes.

4.3 It is also important to distinguish certificate programs from the certification of individuals. Certification is a process through which a nongovernmental entity grants a time-limited recognition to an individual after verifying that he or she has met established criteria for proficiency or competency, usually through an eligibility application and assessment. While certification eligibility criteria may specify a certain type or amount of education or training, the learning event(s) are not typically provided by the certifying body. Instead, the certifying body verifies education or training and experience obtained elsewhere through an application process and administers a standardized assessment of current proficiency or competency.

4.4 In contrast, in a certificate program the learning event(s) and the assessment(s) are both developed and administered by the certificate issuer, and there is an essential link between them. That is, the learning event(s) are designed to help participants achieve learning outcomes and the assessment is designed to evaluate the learners' attainment of those intended learning outcomes.

4.5 Also, certifications have ongoing requirements for maintaining proficiency/competency and can be revoked for not meeting these ongoing requirements. In contrast, certificates do not have ongoing maintenance or renewal requirements and therefore, cannot be revoked.

5. Requirements for Certificate Issuers

5.1 *Organizational Structure and Administration*—The certificate issuer shall be structured and administered in such a way that confidence is given to stakeholders of its authority and qualifications to issue the certificate.

5.1.1 The certificate issuer shall be, or reside within, a legal business entity or governmental agency.

5.1.2 The certificate issuer shall be an appropriate and qualified issuer of the certificate.

5.1.2.1 The certificate program's purpose, scope, and intended outcomes are consistent with the stated mission and work of the certificate issuer.

5.1.3 The certificate issuer shall have a clearly designated authority charged to administer the certificate program and ensure compliance with the provisions of this practice.

5.2 *Management*—The certificate issuer shall be responsibly and effectively managed and operated.

5.2.1 Policies and procedures of the certificate program shall be fair and equitable and comply with all applicable regulatory and statutory requirements and legal obligations.

5.2.1.1 There shall be written policies and procedures outlined to address, at a minimum, the following:

(1) Certificate program plan;

(2) Records and document control;

(3) Internal audit;

(4) Certificate issuance and use;

(5) Invalidating a certificate;

(6) Complaints and appeals;

(7) Privacy, confidentiality, and security;

(8) Program commercial support and disclosure;

(9) Fees, cancellation, and refunds;

(10) Compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act; and

(11) Nondiscrimination.

5.2.1.2 Personnel shall be assigned to implement systematically and effectively the policies and procedures within a framework that is clearly defined and understood.

5.2.2 The certificate issuer shall have sufficient and qualified personnel to conduct certificate program activities properly.

5.2.2.1 The certificate issuer shall define the qualifications for personnel involved in certificate program activities.

5.2.2.2 Personnel shall be qualified for their assigned roles on the basis of appropriate education, training, or experience, or combination thereof.

5.2.2.3 The certificate issuer shall evaluate on an ongoing basis the qualifications of personnel to perform assigned roles. Training and development plans shall be implemented where deficiencies are found.

5.2.3 The certificate issuer shall demonstrate responsible financial management and have sufficient financial resources to conduct certificate program activities properly.

5.2.3.1 Formal financial reports shall provide evidence of financial stability.

(1) Where certificate programs are one element of a certificate issuer's activities, the certificate program finances shall be a clear and identifiable component of overall reports.

NOTE 1—The financial reports should provide evidence that the certificate issuer can sustain the certificate program in conformance with the requirements of this practice for a reasonable amount of time.

5.2.3.2 Written procedures shall exist for proper financial controls.

5.2.4 The certificate issuer shall demonstrate responsible and timely communications to primary stakeholders of the certificate program.

5.2.4.1 The certificate issuer shall publish (or make available to primary stakeholders) the following information in advance of the program:

(1) Certificate program purpose, scope, and intended learning outcomes;

(2) Description of the requisites to earn the certificate;

(3) Special requirements for participation, if applicable (such as technology equipment or skills);

(4) Qualifications of instructional personnel;

(5) Fees, deadlines, cancellation, and refund policies;

(6) Academic or continuing education credit earned, specified in the terms outlined by the credit-approving entity;

(7) Commercial support disclosure, if applicable;

(8) Any changes to the certificate program purpose, scope, intended learning outcomes, requisites, and the effective date of the changes; and