

What's Wrong with Curriculum-Based Certificates?

The short answer: Nothing. There has been a long-standing myth in the certification community that credentials with a training or educational component – frequently referred to as curriculum-based certificate programs – are second-rate, lack rigor and are misleading to the public and other stakeholders. The truth is there are some instances in which these programs may be more appropriate and more effective in meeting industry and stakeholders' needs than professional certification programs. The following are hallmarks of quality for curriculum-based certificates.

Meets stakeholder or industry needs. The decision to develop a certificate program should be informed by a thoughtful needs analysis to determine how the envisioned credential will meet a pressing market need. Curriculum-based certificates may be appropriate when the goal is to train and assess individuals in a narrow range of knowledge and skills (vs. the full scope of a profession/occupation). An example of this would be a customer service certificate for airline ticketing agents. New professional procedures/techniques or emerging specialties, which are “add-ons” to the core knowledge and skills targeted by a professional certification program, also may form the basis for certificate programs.

Based on a body of knowledge validated by the profession/industry. At a minimum, there should be a validation process involving the input of experts. A subsequent consensus-driven process, providing an opportunity for the wider profession/industry to confirm the content for the certificate, also is desirable.

Has an assessment component. Completion of an assessment process, linked to the curriculum, should be required. The method may vary depending on what is being measured. A multiple-choice test is appropriate for assessing whether participants understand new federal guidelines; a performance test for assessing whether they can operate equipment safely. Just as in certification tests, there should be a sound rationale for determining the passing score.

Does not overpromise or misrepresent. Communications and marketing materials should avoid presenting the certificate as having the same attributes as a certification. Highly conscientious program sponsors will include an explicit explanation of how the certificate differs from certification.