



NCCA Frequently Asked Questions

When is an organization eligible to apply for accreditation for one or more of its programs?

A new certification program (one that has not previously received NCCA accreditation) may apply for accreditation either after one year of administration of the assessment instrument or when at least 500 candidates have been assessed with that instrument, whichever comes first. These alternative eligibility pathways (i.e., one year or 500 candidates) are in place in recognition of the wide range of candidate volumes and assessment instrument modalities possible for high-quality certification programs.

For example, these alternatives are intended to allow for computer based, paper and pencil or other types of administrations and to avoid prohibiting programs with small candidate volumes from eligibility. Regarding small volume programs, it is recognized that the number of candidates upon which appropriate psychometric analyses can be conducted is debatable. Commissioners have generally agreed that 500 candidates are enough. There have been many instances in which the validity of the examination results have been reasonably well assured with far fewer candidates. The primary rationale for this requirement is that the commission can only be assured of compliance with the standards after the program has demonstrated completion of all critical program activities, including development and implementation of policies and procedures and development, administration and scoring of the assessment instrument.

When should an organization apply for accreditation for a program?

Even after organizations become eligible to apply, they might choose to delay submission of an application for a program for a variety of reasons. The primary reason may often be that the organization has not yet been satisfied with the stability of certain aspects of the program, and may realize that some questions may exist about compliance with the standards. Most certification organizations are aware of the need for continuous quality improvement and provide ongoing efforts to continually refine details related to their programs. The NCCA encourages programs to seek accreditation as soon as they believe they will meet the standards.

How can my organization receive a copy of the application?

On the Web, of course! The most current copy of the application and the standards is always accessible at www.credentialingexcellence.org. Those without Internet access may contact the ICE/NCCA office at 202/367-1165 or through mail at 2025 M Street, NW, Suite 800, Washington, DC, 20036-3309.

Are there deadlines for the application?

Deadlines for submitting an application are Jan. 31, April 30 and Sept. 30 of each year. Organizations should submit a letter of intent to the ICE/NCCA office at least 90 days prior to submitting its application. This letter of intent helps the office staff and Commissioners in planning to ensure a complete and fair review of all applications in a timely manner.

When is the status of the organization's application available?

The timeline following the submission of an application can vary slightly, primarily depending on the specific meeting dates of the Commissioners. When an application is submitted, the ICE/NCCA office staff can often provide a program with more specific information about the proposed timeline. Typically, however, the Commissioners meet approximately two months after the application deadline and programs are notified approximately six weeks after that meeting.



An individual Commissioner may contact a program representative to ask questions of clarification or to seek additional information, but this contact should not be interpreted as notification about the status of an application. Notification of the status of the application will arrive in the form of a letter from the NCCA chair, normally about three to four months following the application deadline.

How do I complete the application?

The NCCA application for accreditation was designed so that each of the standards is addressed in order, thus reinforcing systematic review of the certification program's compliance by the applicant as well as facilitating the NCCA evaluation process. Keep the following steps in mind as you prepare your new or renewal application:

- Carefully read and follow the written instructions. Call or e-mail the ICE/NCCA staff if you have questions. You may be referred to a Commissioner for follow-up.
- Complete every page, including the required forms.
- Submit only one copy of each exhibit per application. Place each exhibit under the proper tab and highlight as needed.
- Make sure tabs are labeled and visible. Include all tabs, even those with no exhibits.
- On the application itself, note the exhibit letter and page number that specifically demonstrates program compliance with each essential element. There may be multiple exhibits or only one exhibit necessary to support compliance. Be sure to include all those exhibits listed as 'required' to support compliance with a specific standard. Otherwise, the number of exhibits provided to support standard compliance is left to the discretion of the applicant.
- Additionally, include a brief narrative that explains how the program supports the standard's essential elements, especially if documentation provided is different from the required or suggested items. Do not simply repeat content referenced in exhibits, but summarize and clarify as necessary.
- More is not always better. For example, submit only a sample page or two from a directory or database as requested, not a printout of the entire certified population.
- Remember, it is the applicant's responsibility to demonstrate how the certification program meets all of the NCCA standards for accreditation, both in letter and in spirit. Clear documentation with specific citations and explanatory comments will help the NCCA reviewers do their job better, and the process should benefit the applicant whose goal is a solid, quality-driven certification program.

How are NCCA accreditation applications reviewed?

The Commission reviews all applications and makes accreditation decisions at its regular meetings, which are typically held at least three times per year (spring, summer and winter). Prior to the Commission meeting, each application is distributed to the full Commission for review. Additionally, two Commissioners are designated to complete detailed standard-by-standard reviews, one focusing on compliance with program administration standards and the other on compliance with psychometric standards.

The written results of these independent reviews are shared with the full Commission. At the Commission meeting, the full Commission discusses each application. After discussion and careful consideration, the Commission makes a decision by a majority vote of the Commissioners. The decision may be to approve accreditation, deny accreditation or delay a decision pending receipt of further information.



NCCA staff and/or the Commissioner's assigned responsibility for preparing detailed written reviews may contact the applicant for further information regarding the certification program. The organization may receive questions or information requests from staff and/or Commissioners before or after the NCCA meeting at which the application is discussed. These communications serve to clarify points in the application or to request additional information to support the application.

What happens if the Commission determines that a certification program does not meet one (or more) of the revised accreditation standards when a previously accredited organization is reviewed as part of the regular accreditation renewal process?

Each certification program that was reviewed as part of an organization's accreditation application under the previous standards will be considered as accredited under the new standards until such time that the program is reviewed for accreditation renewal (typically, five years after initial accreditation or the last accreditation renewal). At that time, the organization will need to submit an accreditation renewal application to NCCA for each certification program reviewed for compliance under the new standards.

If the program does not meet one or more of the new standards, a re-accreditation decision will be delayed to allow the program reasonable time to address any deficiencies needed to bring the program into compliance with the new standards. The NCCA will provide feedback to the applicant specifying those aspects of the program that are judged as not meeting standards. The NCCA will also establish a timeframe within which the program will need to provide documentation to demonstrate compliance with the new standards. In effect, the program will be granted a grace period to address deficiencies. The program will maintain its accredited status during this grace period.

In general, the NCCA expects programs accredited under the previous standards will be in compliance with the new standards. For example, standards related to the psychometric integrity of the program's certification assessment process have not fundamentally changed, even though they are organized somewhat differently and may involve different documentation requirements. An area that some programs may need to revisit relates to recertification policies given that the new standards more clearly delineate requirements regarding periodic certificant recertification.

What does the NCCA mean by "assessment instruments?"

The glossary provided with the NCCA Standards document defines an "assessment instrument" as: "Any one of several standardized methods for determining if candidates possess the necessary knowledge and/or skill related to the purpose of the certification."

The NCCA is using this broader term in its new standards and accreditation process because it applies not only to the traditional multiple-choice, paper-and-pencil examination, but also to the increasing number of computer-based tests (e.g., linear, adaptive, essays, simulations and so forth) and other assessment methods such as oral examinations, written simulations, case scenarios and portfolio assessments.

A certification program may require candidates to complete one or more standardized assessment instruments. When applying for NCCA accreditation, organizations must provide documentation for each assessment instrument used to make certification decisions for a given program. The goal of the Commission is to ensure that assessment instruments used to make certification decisions, whether traditional written or computer-based examinations, performance-based assessments or some other evaluation tool, are fair, reliable and valid.



Does a certification board have to be separately incorporated?

A certification board does not have to be separately incorporated, but the board must be able to demonstrate that they have autonomy in decision making regarding essential certification activities.

Can a certification organization offer educational programs?

A certification organization can offer educational materials for prospective candidates as long as the organization/agency sponsored education is not a required prerequisite to obtain the credential and other methods of preparation are available. The certification organization should not say that taking the education (especially a review course) will help the individual to pass the test or will guarantee any particular score. If other prep courses, education, reference materials, etc. are available, the certification organization should note this. For example, noting that there are other or many choices for exam preparation or review, and including or referring to other references/titles in published materials diminishes the conflict of interest perception.

Do the NCCA Standards require alternative pathways to eligibility?

Although the Standards do not require an alternative pathway in all situations, the certification program should have a standardized means of evaluating the equivalence of education, so that individuals who have obtained their educational preparation outside of the established pathways may have their qualifications evaluated for eligibility to obtain the certification. Specific examples of such a mechanism would be an option for the determination of foreign degree equivalence with a degree granted by a U.S. university or a standardized mechanism for assessing prior learning resulting from work experience in order to waive course or supervised practice requirements.

One recommendation would be for the certification program to conduct a pilot study to assess the amount of experience or experience plus "lesser" education that would be required such that the candidates from this new pathway would pass the exam at a statistically equivalent or similar rate as those who enter through the "standard" educational pathway. Without an alternative examination eligibility pathway available to these individuals, the certification program risks unduly restricting entry into the workforce or promotions to those who attend the standard educational program.

Our job analysis is currently based on a focus group method. Is this acceptable or is a survey required?

A survey is not required for a job analysis to be accepted by the Commission. Focus groups or other methodologies could be suitable in certain instances. The certification program should understand that while it may save costs by not distributing and analyzing a survey, the job/task analysis must nonetheless be rigorous enough to support the validity of the examination results. The accreditation application would need to provide a clear and complete description of the process used and how that process led to the development of the assessment instrument specifications.

How often should our certification program conduct a job analysis?

The NCCA has not set fixed or established time frames for how often the job analysis must occur. However, it is important that there is a process and time frame for the job analysis. The applying program should provide the rationale for the expected schedule in its application. Many programs typically conduct a job analysis every five to seven years.

How many individuals are required to serve on a job analysis committee?



The NCCA Standards do not require any specific minimum or maximum number of individuals serving on a job analysis committee. The accreditation application review will focus on ensuring the certification program had thoughtfully considered committee membership and that the subject matter expertise is appropriate to meet the needs of the research design for the study. Similarly, the sample size for a job/practice analysis is not specified, although the sample should be appropriate to the profession and the certification program.

Do NCCA Standards prohibit an organization from offering a practice test?

An organization is not prohibited from offering practice tests to prospective candidates under the proper circumstances. In general, NCCA considers a few guidelines to apply, primarily reflecting issues of fairness to candidates and truth in marketing the product. For example, the organization should not state or imply that purchasing a practice test is a requirement for certification, nor should they generally state or imply that those who purchase practice tests outperform candidates who do not. Also, the cost for practice test should be reasonable (or free), such that there could not be an allegation that only those with ample resources should seek certification. The primary intent should be to help candidates, not to generate revenue.

How can we look for public members with experience in "boardsmanship" or consumer advocacy?

Ask national, state, and local consumer organizations to recommend individuals with experience in consumer advocacy. To find these organizations, contact your state or local Office of Consumer Affairs. Ask civic organizations, such as PTAs, community centers, libraries, League of Women Voters, benevolent societies, church groups, senior citizen organizations, and so on to refer potential public members who have boardsmanship experience. The Citizen Advocacy Center (www.cacenter.org), a support network for public members, is sometimes able to refer candidates for public member positions.

Is it appropriate to use the public member slot to get access to skills not otherwise present on the board, such as legal, accounting, or marketing skills?

No, this is not the role of the public member and may create a conflict of interest. It is best to hire employees or contract with consultants to provide these services.

Should a public member have all the rights and responsibilities the other board members enjoy?

Yes, the public member should vote on all matters that come before the board and be eligible to hold office or committee appointments.

Is it okay to have more than one public member?

Yes. NCCA requires only one, but some boards find the contributions of public members very valuable and have more than one position on the board for them.