



The Certification Advantage



of Certification Use

By learning a few of the basics, career and technical educators can chart a path to effective integration of certifications into their programs.



You, as a career and technical educator, provide individuals who are about to enter the world of work—and those already in that world—with the opportunity to acquire the relevant knowledge and skills they need to fulfill their full working potential. Some say that what you do is key to making our educational system competitive again. Your use of contextual learning—providing students opportunities to apply knowledge and skills in real-world situations—is being touted by many as the way to deliver the quality schooling our educational system promises to supply. Not only does it afford students the opportunity to effectively learn marketable technical knowledge and skills, it also provides them the chance to exercise learned knowledge from their core subjects.

Isn't it ironic then that the slippery nature of what you are trying to mimic and teach in your classroom—today's "real-world situations" and the knowledge and skills they imply—can result

in you not fulfilling your full working potential? Simply put, today's economy continues to trigger dramatic shifts in what employers expect their workforce to know and be able to do. Knowledge and skills simply depreciate in value much faster than they once did. As a result, you are finding that the knowledge and skills that were relevant yesterday may not be relevant today, and those relevant today may not be relevant in the very near future.

This fact has led employers to question the very meaning of the credentials we confer to students. Overcoming this perception by keeping pace and getting ahead of the "relevance" curve—to be more demand driven—at a time when resources for doing so are becoming more finite is your challenge.

If you see yourself in the description above, you are not alone. Most of the individuals involved with education at the federal, state and local levels are struggling with the relevance issue. This includes employers themselves. The rapid pace of change in technology, for example, strains even the largest



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employers' capability to ensure that their workforce has the most current stock of knowledge and skills it needs to pursue its mission.

If employers are finding it hard to keep pace with the relevance curve, then what are educators to do? Some educators are doing the very same thing that some employers are doing. They are turning to tools such as certifications to gain a firmer grasp on what is relevant. The use of certifications in education continues to be a relevant topic of conversation at the federal, state and local levels.

This is not surprising. Consider what it would take for an educational system to keep pace with the relevance curve. It requires, at the very least, three tightly linked processes: a process for identifying what employers expect individuals to know and be able to do; a process for developing courses and materials that they can use to provide individuals the opportunity to learn what employers expect individuals to know and be able to do; and a process for ensuring that individuals' mastery of employers' expectations is recognized in a way that provides them with marketable credentials. Enter stage left—certifications.

Absent content standards for technical knowledge and skills (that are analogous to academic standards for math and science), certifications serve as *de facto* content standards that provide educational institutions with an efficient way for defining the knowledge and skills relevant to industries. And it doesn't stop there. Certification-related "off-the-shelf" teaching materials and resources are now readily available, making it easier for educators to teach the knowledge and skills identified in these *de facto* content standards. And the icing on the cake—the use of certifications provides educational institutions the ability to confer credentials that provide students demonstrable proof

that they have met the *de facto* content standards.

Increasing popularity of certification use in education can be attributed to one or more of the three reasons listed above. But their promise as a demand-driven tool belies the potential challenges you may face when considering their use. While acceptable in one institution, their use may be problematic in another. What is appropriate in one place may not be appropriate in another place. Those that fit the needs of others may not necessarily fit yours. Use of certifications may solve one problem, but may also result in others.

It is not my goal here to scare educators away from using certifications, nor is it my goal to convince them of their benefits. My goal is to simply emphasize the need for a standard of due care—and to provide some guidance on how to do so—when considering the topics of using industry-based certifications and which industry-based certification to use. Take deliberate steps—attend to the "ABCs" of certification use.



A is for Assessment

Assess the pros and cons of certification use—be "market" not "marketing" driven. First and foremost, be clear about why you want to use certifications. Think about the three processes described earlier and the certification's potential role in each. Now, ask yourself this question: "Why am I considering the use of certifications?"

Are you experiencing specific pains that you want to cure? Or are you trying to open opportunities related to certification use? An "armchair exercise" you can use here is to think about what

success means to you with respect to certification use.

Imagine that two years have passed, and you have successfully integrated certifications into your program. What story would you tell about your success? The resulting story will more than likely include the reasons you are even considering using certifications today.

Next, bear in mind your own local market when considering the use of certifications. Certification use does not occur in a vacuum. Its eventual use will depend on and affect others. Hence, evaluate certification use from the perspective of your local stakeholders (e.g., administration, faculty, staff, industry partners, students and parents) and identify the pros and cons of certification use from *each* of their perspectives. This evaluation should help you decide if there is a role for certification use in your local market. If so, the evaluation will also help you craft messages about certification use that are specific, clear, persuasive and, more importantly, reflect your local stakeholders' perspectives. You can use these messages to elicit backing for your planned certification use.

Finally, I suggest that you take these steps *without a specific certification in mind*. Think first about certification use in general, and don't allow the marketing materials of a specific certification provider cloud your evaluation. The discussion that took up the first two-thirds of this article should provide you with a starting point for thinking about certification use in general.



B is for Building Momentum

If there is a will, there is a way. Now that you have assessed the pros and cons of certification use, you can turn to the business of building momentum and gaining buy-in. Remember, integrating certifications into a program is not as



simple as it sounds. You will need all the support you can muster to ensure success. Take this time to “get your foot in the door.”

While building momentum will rely mostly on how persuasive you are in arguing for the benefits of certification use, there are four things you need to remember. First, do not “devalue” any of your key local stakeholders. While it may be wise to gain buy-in from your leadership first, ensure that you reach out to all your key local stakeholders.

Second, you will undoubtedly have a mix of audiences, so tailor your message accordingly. Ensure that you target the right message to the right audience.

Third, be flexible. You will definitely need to accommodate emerging concerns. At times, your patience may be spread thin, but don’t let that detract you from your goal of building momentum.

Fourth, plan to include your key local stakeholders in the process of integrating certifications into your program. This could mean active participation on their part, or you just providing them with updates about what is going on as the process unfolds. Either one will go a long way toward building momentum.



C is for Charting a Course

Navigate the certification landscape with an eye toward your needs. The certification landscape is vast. You will need a way to narrow down the list. And even if there is only one certification for the topic area of interest to you, you still need to find a way to judge whether it is appropriate for your program. In our work, charting a course for navigating the certification landscape

consists of five major activity clusters

- developing criteria for evaluating appropriateness of certification(s);
- collecting the right information about the certification(s);
- evaluating the certification(s) based on criteria you have defined;
- developing an implementation plan for integrating the chosen certification(s); and
- implementing the plan.

For the most part, specific elements of these activity clusters will vary based on, but not limited to:

- your intended use of the certification (*i.e.*, which of the three processes identified earlier in this article is of interest to you).
- the extent to which you have the resources needed to accomplish the activity clusters.
- the critical concerns of your key local stakeholders.
- the topic area of interest to you.

While these factors will necessarily force you to develop a customized set of criteria that reflects your own needs, be assured that once you do so, the conduct of the other major activity clusters is self-explanatory.

To assist you in charting your course, I’ve listed examples of questions you may want to consider when developing your own set of criteria. For ease of use, I’ve divided the questions into three categories that parallel the three processes previously identified.

Expectation Questions

These are some of the questions to consider when developing criteria for evaluating certification providers’ expectations of what individuals need to know and be able to do.

1. Who is the certification’s target population?
2. How well did they define the target population? Does it facilitate a clear understanding of the occupations that make up the target population?
3. How did they define what individuals are expected to know and be able to do? Did they employ acceptable methods for eliciting an initial list of expectations and for verifying the identified expectations?
4. Are expectations of what individuals need to know (*i.e.*, knowledge and skills) based on a solid understanding of what those individuals are expected to do (*i.e.*, work)?
5. Who did they use to define what individuals in the target population are expected to know and be able to do? Are they industry people? Are they experts from the target population?
6. How many people participated in the delineation of the expectations and how representative are they of the target population?
7. When was the last time they reviewed their list of expectations? How often do they review their list of expectations? What triggers a review?

These questions should provide you with some ideas about the types of criteria you may want to establish about the certification provider’s list of expectations. The first question allows you to easily establish whether the certification is appropriate for your student population. The rest of the questions deal with the extent to which you can be confident that the list of expectations is valid.

To establish whether a specific certification meets the criteria you’ve established based on these questions, ask the certification provider for a document that describes how they validated the certification (*i.e.*, a validation study or





report). The information you are looking for should be included or discussed in the section that describes how they arrived at the certification “test blueprint” that they used to develop the certification. This section typically falls under the heading of “job analysis” or “task analysis” or “competency modeling.”

Learning-Offering Questions

Questions to consider when developing criteria for evaluating whether requirements for teaching certification-related materials are acceptable to you and your institution include:

1. What are the certification or accreditation requirements for the instructors, programs and/or your institution?
2. What are the certification’s resource requirements (e.g., space, instruments, equipments, materials, infrastructure needs, etc.)?

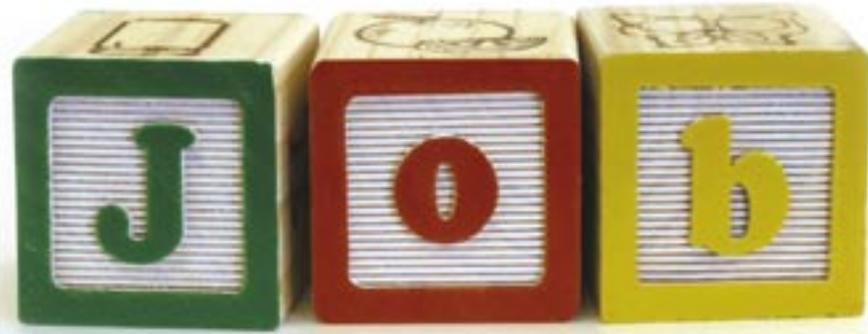
Some certification providers require instructors, programs and institutions to be certified and/or accredited to teach their materials. These requirements may not be acceptable to you, your key local stakeholders, your program or your institution. Understanding what you can accommodate allows you to fairly judge whether or not a certification’s requirements are something you can work with.

Information about certification requirements on instructors, programs and institutions are typically provided in the certification provider’s Web site or marketing materials.

Credential Questions

Questions to consider when developing criteria for evaluating whether you can realistically confer the certification credential and the value of conferring the certification credential include:

1. What are the education, experience and certification requirements for students?
2. To what extent do employers and/or other educational institutions value the credential?



3. To what extent is the certification test based on the defined expectations of what individuals need to know and be able to do?

The first question allows you to further gauge the appropriateness of the certification for your student population. It is impractical, for example, to offer a certification credential to high school students if obtaining the credential requires an associate degree. Information about certification prerequisites can typically be found in the certification provider’s Web site or promotional materials.

Question 2 refers to the actual value employers and educators endow on the certification credential. For example, is the credential something that employers use in their selection process? Similarly, do educational institutions use the credential as part of their articulation agreements? To gain insight into this question, I suggest talking to your key local industry and education stakeholders about this issue.

Questions 2 and 3 allow you to gauge the value of the certification credential itself. The credential is only of value if it employs a valid test. One way to check a test’s validity—that doesn’t require advanced knowledge in measurement—is to gauge the link between the defined expectations and the test that measures those expectations. This is a familiar task to all educators, as they typically develop tests to assess students’ understanding of learning objectives that make up a course. This information can be found in the validation study or report briefly described above.



Summary

Educators continue to show interest in the topic of certification use, which is not surprising. Certifications provide educators access to *de facto* content standards that define expectations of what students need to know and be able to do; teaching materials and resources that make it easier for educators to teach the knowledge and skills defined in these *de facto* content standards; and credentials that they can confer to students who have demonstrated mastery of the *de facto* content standards.

This article provides a primer on a process that educators can use to manage the integration of certifications into their programs and, hence, gain access to the benefits of certification use without being bogged down by the challenges it presents. ■

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