



Ensuring the Quality of **CERTIFICATE PROGRAMS**

ASTM E2659 and ANSI Accreditation

BY CICELY ENRIGHT

On Sullivan University's three Kentucky campuses, certificate programs lead the way as its fastest growing offerings.

That's according to Tom Davisson, Sullivan senior vice president, who adds that a local community college shares the same uptick in interest and enrollment. The reason, he says, is that "both the individual student and companies are recognizing the value of the skill sets that certificate programs offer."

A certificate program provides tangible evidence that an individual has completed a particular course, study or training and attained specific learning goals.

There are tens of thousands of programs out there, notes Roy Swift, Ph.D., senior director of personnel credentialing accreditation programs at the American

National Standards Institute, New York, N.Y. "It's pretty much buyer beware as to whether the particular certificate program has value, whether it is endorsed by industry and whether it provides essential knowledge and skills based on a systematic needs assessment."

Now, a new ASTM International standard, and an ANSI accreditation program citing that standard, will provide a way to gauge the quality of a certificate program, whether it addresses programming languages or paralegals, maintenance or cooking. E2659, Practice for Certificate Programs, defines certificate programs and delineates the characteristics of a high quality program. And it is the standard against which the ANSI Certificate Accreditation Program will measure applicant programs when it kicks off next year.



DEFINING AND DESCRIBING CERTIFICATES AND CERTIFICATE PROGRAMS

E2659, developed by Subcommittee E36.30 on Personnel Certificate Programs, a part of Committee E36 on Accreditation and Certification, represents a collaboration across the certificate program spectrum, including colleges and universities, government agencies, nonprofits, for-profits and certificate programs.

The standard clarifies both certificate and certificate programs so that groups offering this type of education and training can be clear on what constitutes each of these options. Key to E2659 is its definitions:

- ▶ A certificate is a “document (letter, card, or other medium) awarded to certificate holders that designates the successful completion of a certificate program’s requisites.”
- ▶ A certificate program is a “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 evaluation of learner attainment of intended learning outcomes.”

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“The primary distinctions between certification and certificate programs are their purpose and core design,” says Mickie Rops, Mickie Rops Consulting Inc., Indianapolis, Ind., who leads the task group that developed the standard. Rops, a 2009 recipient of the ASTM/Standards Engineering Society Robert J. Painter Award for her work with the task group, adds that certification assesses an individual’s current knowledge and skills, and identifies those who meet the minimum established criteria. A certificate program provides education or training so that individuals can achieve specified learning outcomes as well as identify those who have achieved them.

There previously had been no American National Standard for certificate programs, although there is an ANS for certification programs: International Organization for Standardization/International Electrotechnical Commission (ISO/IEC) 17024, Conformity Assessment — General Requirements for Bodies Operating Certification of Persons. “E2659 closes the loop by distinguishing between these two program types and outlining the quality criteria for certificate programs,” Rops says.

A certificate is like a diploma, notes Kathy Shurte, chair of E36.30 and a manager in the Training, Development and Performance Management Office, Florida Department of Transportation, Ft. Lauderdale, Fla. Once certain requirements have been met, the student receives confirmation — typically on paper, dated and signed — that signifies he or she learned something. They own it. On the other hand, Shurte says, “Certification is a process, a living thing. It is not based on a learning event like the certificate; instead it documents an individual’s collective knowledge and skill in the subject matter, and then tracks that the individual keeps current and maintains that working knowledge; it’s ongoing and revocable.”

If a certificate program meets E2659, a prospective student will have assur-

ance that the program has merit and even more assurance, if it has been accredited by the ANSI CAP. “We want people to know that when they finish a certificate program, they ... have been tested and shown that they have the skill that the certificate said they would have,” says Shurte.

E2659: WHAT IT’S ALL ABOUT

As Rops puts it, the E2659 significance and use section sets the stage for the entire document in building on the standard’s definitions and distinguishing between these concepts and certification.

The standard goes on to cover what constitutes an instructionally sound certificate program in sections on:

- ▶ Requirements for Certificate Issuers,
- ▶ Requirements for the Certificate Program and
- ▶ Requirements for Certificate Issuance and Use.

E2659 details requirements for certificate issuers — colleges and universities, government agencies, employers, training organizations and professional/trade associations — that cover a group’s structure, management and administration.

The certificate program requirements call for a plan that includes a systematic approach from analysis and design to implementation and evaluation. Specific steps begin with identifying and documenting the program’s purpose and audience as well as its scope and intended learning outcomes. The standard further advises on revisiting the course or curriculum and evaluating both what attendees learn and the program itself on a regular basis.

THE ANSI CAP PROCESS

ANSI is currently assessing its certificate accreditation program process with a pilot that utilizes E2659 as the measuring stick. Eleven participating organizations submitted diverse certificate programs — from behavioral science and benefits

to maintenance and management — that currently are being evaluated using the new standard. Those groups include Sullivan University, government agencies such as the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and EdTrek Inc., a training and development organization.

“We had a tremendous response from people wanting to be in the pilot,” Swift says. He adds that the pilot will give ANSI a mechanism to evaluate the accreditation process and refine the program if necessary before rolling it out officially on March 1, 2010.

Both consumers and employers will find E2659 helpful in determining certificate program quality. In this down economy and with fewer employees due to layoffs, notes Davisson, certificate programs can provide the largest and most immediate return on investment for employers needing to further their staff members’ skill sets.

Shurte believes that certificate programs are the way of the future. “Certificate programs will be the way we keep our employees trained and skilled in this changing world that we live in,” she says.

As for the ANSI CAP, Davisson comments that accreditation provides an important mechanism for groups offering certificates. “The accreditation process, while often onerous and time consuming, always, I repeat always, makes us better,” he says. “Self-examination against standards is a great measuring stick.”

TO LEARN MORE

A workshop on the accreditation of certificate-issuing bodies will be held February 11-12, 2010, in Washington, D.C., to introduce interested users to E2659 and the ANSI CAP. For more information about the workshop, contact Roy Swift, Ph.D., ANSI (phone: 202-331-3617; rswift@ansi.org).

For more information about E2659 and Committee E36, contact Rick Lake, ASTM International (phone: 610-832-9689; rlake@astm.org).