

Continued Learning and Recertification (Ethics CEU)

Continued learning is a rudimentary component to the maintenance of competency and growth as a professional. It is also a relevant ethical responsibility for individuals who participate in the health care and guidance of others. In most cases, continued education is required for professional and vocational jobs that require certification and/or licensing. The foundation for this type of education is defined by the role delineation study or job task analysis. These studies reflect in depth evaluations of what a professional does on a daily basis, as well as the knowledge and skills that support those responsibilities. These same competencies are measured on assessment instruments (exams) used to qualify a candidate for professional credentialing and therefore are an obvious foundation for continued learning as well. When continued education is constructed in this manner – with an emphasis on the domains of a profession and is supported by strong industry standards, the work embodies key aspects of professionalism and represents best practices.

Organizations such as the NCSF that operate using benchmark practices, employ continued education departments or committees to create a framework by which practicing professionals can follow to ensure they comply with recertification or licensing renewals. To understand how continued education requirements are established one must look to the elements that separate a qualified person from one who is not qualified to perform the job tasks. The first step in this process is to identify the key knowledge and practice domains. These are the areas of professional practice that embody the knowledge, skills, and abilities or what are often referred to as the KSA's. While each profession varies in the extensiveness of these domains, there is usually a relatively similar number of practice and knowledge areas

related to allied health jobs. For a personal trainer, practice areas represent those that require one to tangibly perform a task, such as spotting a squat; whereas knowledge domains represent those aspects of decision making, such as avoiding heavy weightlifting in a program for a hypertensive client. While both are very relevant, they are distinctively different. All too commonly a practicing professional leans too heavily to one side, suggesting excessive emphasis on one area over the other. Using the prior example a trainer who only knows the “hows” to exercise is no better than a trainer who only knows the “whys”. In fact, this phenomenon is so common that there are actually different camps in fitness instruction. To generalize, one camp embodies the college graduate who has a host of book knowledge but no practical skills and in the other camp is the applied practitioner who is skilled in practical applications but seriously lacks the theoretical aspects. Both tend to look down on the other and often criticize the opposite weakness. In reality, both demonstrate as much ignorance as they do competency. This common outcome further supports the need for continued education.

At the organizational level continued education functions as an extension of credentialing. The continued education department or committee's role is to ensure that all aspects of professional competency are covered. This is where continued education credits come into play, as a quantifiable metric is necessary to identify if proper attainment of competency has been met. Continued education for recertification provides assurance to stakeholders of the credential that safe practices can be maintained by those certified or licensed for the profession in lieu of re-testing for competency.

To manage this important aspect of credentialing the department will first create a framework of practice domains so approved coursework is appropriate and balanced across professional practices, essentially an apposite distribution of “how and whys”. The next step is defining the depth of knowledge equivalent to the content areas or the proficiency level of the practical skills required of a profession. Once defined, these components are used to establish the total credit requirements and the value or potential of a particular, or group of learning outcomes. Again, the specific knowledge, skill or ability that qualifies under the credit system has already been established by the role delineation study or job task analysis.

Earning credit toward continued education requires participating in any variety of learning experiences. The person, organization, or educational institution offering the education is referred to as the education provider. When offering coursework related to the development of a practical or theoretical competency the provider of the education program must demonstrate the intended learning outcomes, that each outcome reflects an approved area of competency, and that the information or instruction provided is at the depth of the intended competency. In addition, the provider of the information or instruction must also prove that they are in fact qualified to teach the material. This is most often established by documented means of formal education or training; where a provider demonstrates participation in an appropriate amount of professional development in the area being instructed. A good rule of thumb is 18 credit hours (at least 810 contact hours) in content specific work. The quality of the work must be at least one level above the participant’s highest competency level. So a bachelor degreed professional can teach high school equivalents, graduate degreed professionals can teach high school and bachelors, and a PhD can teach

anyone, assuming that each of the aforementioned are trained in the area specific to the learning outcomes. Therefore, when looking for coursework to satisfy a continued education requirement, first ensure the education provider is qualified to instruct the course or the participation may be invalidated by the organization due to the lack of instructor qualifications.

When deciding on a course of action to recertify the first step for a professional is to determine if there are any areas of weakness with regard to the theoretical and practice domains. Professionals commonly pursue areas of interest over areas of weakness. A well rounded professional is much better prepared to deal with the challenges of a job over someone who specializes in certain areas. This is not to suggest specializing is a negative, but when competency deficiencies exist they should be the first area addressed by continuing education. A self analysis can provide information regarding what areas are lacking, but utilizing a peer or superior’s evaluation is often painfully more accurate. There exists a natural tendency for professionals to want to downplay flaws and focus on areas of superiority as no one is generally proud of their shortcomings. However, identifying and addressing these areas is forward professional growth and once a competency par is reached, specialization makes more sense.

Once the areas of need are identified or a specialization is warranted the next step is seeking an appropriate source for the education. In most cases, the specific competency requirements will determine the education platform, albeit college courses, industry conferences or clinics, internships, shadowing or distance learning courses. Obviously, practical skills are probably best done in learn-by-doing environments as most academics will argue online or classroom courses often lack proper learner engagement and evaluation. But the

actual geographical reach of some courses makes this difficult for those in rural areas or with limited resources as they are often more expensive. Online coursework and home study activities certainly offer flexibility but are more difficult for those who do not have regimented study habits. Regardless of the type of learning, the easiest way to identify if the course matches the intended competency needs is to look at the learning outcomes. This is particularly important if the provider is not “approved” or “pre-qualified,” as continued education departments will determine the value of the education by the instructor qualifications, the learning outcomes, and contact hours. Additionally, there is a tendency for certification organizations to assign less value for the same content when it was not formally evaluated by an education reviewer. When a provider submits content to a continued education department they are audited for the education value and consequently an appropriate number of credits are assigned and categorized, so it is easy for the professional to earn and use without dispute. Many larger providers will pay for providerships on several courses and operate specifically as a continued education company. These groups provide varied value and they often have sold enough content that peer review can be used to help determine if a particular course is the right fit for one’s professional needs. Always evaluate an educational product in the same way as any other product; read reviews and talk to other professionals.

Lastly, continued education requires a timely response and formal application. Reputable organizations will provide a recertification handbook so professionals can discern content domains, outline how values are determined and what is demonstrative of an acceptable activity. The major error that most certified professionals make is not knowing when they are due, which creates a stressful situation and potentially large headache. People do lose their jobs in extreme cases by letting credentials lapse. To help avoid

this situation reputable organizations send out reminders to candidates up for renewal, but ultimately it is the professional who is responsible for the outcome. It is therefore prudent to verify with the organization current data files so that notices and emails are received. The second major error comes from not properly tracking CEUs and subsequently coming up short when renewal is due. The commonplace of this professional slip-up has forced most certification and licensing boards to provide a short grace period. In some cases the grace period is automatically applied, in others the professional must petition the renewal. One way to increase the chances of successfully petitioning a late renewal is to already be enrolled in a course. Most departments and committees do not look fondly on those individuals who have not completed any activities during the renewal cycle.

A simple five step process can be used to prevent an inadvertent but potential credential-loss situation. **Step One:** Review the renewal application and literature; identify the content areas of need and determine the number of credits required from each category. Be sure required areas such as ethics are accounted for in this procedure. **Step Two:** Establish a continued education timeline and identify potential sources of qualified content. **Step Three:** Implement the continued education strategy and make adjustments as necessary to complete the work in a timely manner. **Step Four:** Review the recertification application a second time; complete the application and ensure all the credits are completed. **Step Five:** make copies of all documents and file away the originals. Submit the document copies with adequate lead time, just in case there is a problem. By complying with these steps and following the basic strategies outlined above continued education should contribute to professional betterment and appropriate competency development over one’s career.