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### **How to Evaluate Alternative Credentials in Behavior Analysis**

Gina Green, PhD, BCBA-D  
Executive Director, APBA

As the demand for applied behavior analysis (ABA) services increases, so do questions about who is qualified to provide and oversee those services – the amount and type of training required to practice ABA, how those requirements should be determined and by whom, and what sort of credentials should be accepted as evidence of reasonable competence in ABA. In that vein, several credentials in ABA and/or “behavior therapy” have been promoted recently as alternatives to the professional credentials issued by the Behavior Analyst Certification Board (BACB). Add to that mix the certificate programs offered by many colleges and universities as well as the “certifications” offered by promoters of certain assessment and intervention techniques and programs, and it’s no wonder confusion is rampant! Here we offer some information and suggestions for differentiating among the various “certificates,” “certifications,” and other credentials our readers might run across.



### **Professional credentials**

There are three main types of credentials for practitioners of most professions: registration, certification, and licensure. Generally speaking, the three types of credentials differ in the extent of regulation and restriction of practice they entail.

*Registration* is at the least stringent end of the continuum: Typically a state, provincial, or national professional organization compiles a roster or registry of practitioners. One may or may not have to have a certain amount of training to be listed on the registry. Usually registration is not required to practice the profession.

*Certification* is a process of verifying that individuals have certain knowledge and skills, typically by requiring them to document that they have had certain formal education and experiential training and to pass an objective examination. Those requirements are determined by members of the profession (more on this later). Most national and international certification programs are operated by professional organizations or nonprofit boards or organizations that have spun off from or are affiliated with professional organizations, though some U.S. states run certification programs. (For instance, the Florida Department of Children and Families developed and managed the certification program for behavior analysts that ultimately became the international BACB program). Certification may or may not be required to practice the profession, but only those who hold a certification can call themselves “certified.”

*Licensure*, which is the most stringent type of occupational regulation, is operated by a governmental entity (state, province, country) under authority of a law that restricts the practice of a profession (and often the use of a particular title) to individuals who meet certain requirements. Those requirements are usually set by the governmental entity -- a licensure board or committee -- but often those requirements incorporate standards established by national credentialing bodies or professional organizations.



Obviously there are some similarities among the three types of credentials, and the differences among them are not always clear cut. For instance, some professional registrations and certifications are written into laws that make holders of those credentials eligible for certain positions or funding, or that restrict certain practices to holders of those credentials; some registrations and certifications serve as the basis for licensure, or are accepted in lieu of licensure by some governments and funders; and in some countries, registration is essentially synonymous with licensure as the latter term is used in the U.S. Generally speaking, however, all valid and legitimate professional credentialing programs have several essential features. These features are derived from case law and accreditation standards (described later) and are designed to protect both the professionals who hold the credentials and those who use their services:

- **A professionally developed, psychometrically valid and reliable written examination**, passage of which is required to obtain the credential. Most high-stakes professional examinations are administered and scored by computers these days, with tight security on test items as well as results.
- **Requirements for eligibility to take the examination.** These often include one or more degrees from accredited educational institutions, specified coursework in the subject matter, and a specified amount and type of experiential training, usually under the supervision of a professional who holds the credential.
- **Continuing education and other requirements for maintaining the credential.**
- **Ethical and disciplinary standards and enforcement procedures.**

- **Due process protections** (e.g., hearings, appeal procedures) for individuals who are deemed ineligible to take the examination, do not pass the examination, are denied the credential for other reasons, are accused of ethical or disciplinary breaches, and are sanctioned for verified violations of disciplinary standards.
- **Systematic, empirical procedures for conducting a job analysis** (also called an occupational, practice, or task analysis). Typically they include convening panels of subject matter experts to develop initial descriptions of the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to practice the profession. Those are converted into an extensive survey by a psychometrician – a person with expertise in test construction and survey design. The survey is sent to large numbers of members of the profession who rate the importance of each knowledge, skill, and ability. The survey data are compiled and analyzed by the psychometrician according to established standards. The resulting *task list* serves as the basis for deriving the eligibility requirements as well as the examination items. The job analysis is repeated at regular intervals, depending on the rate of change in the profession.



- **An independent nonprofit organization or board** that manages the credentialing program (i.e., determining requirements, reviewing applications, verifying eligibility, enforcing disciplinary standards, keeping records, communicating with credential holders and others, and overseeing job analyses, exam administration and security, continuing education, and other program components). The organization or board typically comprises several professionals who hold the credential as well as one or more consumers and perhaps representatives of other professions. A nonprofit organization will have a Board of Directors and often an Executive Director or CEO. There may be other employees who assist the organization or board. Accredited credentialing entities must make decisions about credentialing standards, measurement instruments,

and activities independently; that is, those decisions must not be subject to undue influence by any individuals, special interest groups, or other organizations. Members of other groups and organizations may be represented on the Board of Directors, but not to the extent that any single group or organization can control or strongly influence the credentialing entity's decision-making.

**Accreditation: What it is and why you should care**

Another essential feature of valid professional credentialing programs is that they are accredited by one of two bodies: The National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA) of the Institute for Credentialing Excellence (see <http://www.credentialingexcellence.org/ProgramsandEvents/NCCAAccreditation/tabid/82/Default.aspx>) or the American National Standards Institute (ANSI; see <https://www.ansica.org/wwwversion2/outside/PERgeneral.asp?menuID=2>). (Note that accreditation pertains to *programs*, whereas the professional credentials discussed earlier are issued to *individuals*). Both of these accreditation programs have rigorous standards covering how the credentialing body is governed and resourced, how it develops its operating policies and procedures, how it conducts the job analysis, how it evaluates applicants' knowledge and skills, how it develops and validates its examination, how it assures secure and confidential storage of exam scores and other information about applicants, and more.



The Behavior Analyst Certification Board (BACB) BCBA and BCaBA credentialing programs, which are endorsed by APBA, are accredited by the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA). We strongly encourage you to become familiar with the NCCA standards, and to refer to them whenever you read or hear comments about how the BACB operates, or when you need to evaluate a claim that another credentialing program is “equivalent” or superior to the BACB's. The standards are available at <http://www.credentialingexcellence.org/portals/0/STANDARDS%20-%20Updated%20January%202010.pdf>



What may not be readily apparent from reading the foregoing is exactly what NCCA accreditation means for BACB certificants and certificants-to-be, consumers of ABA services, governments, and our field. Here are the main benefits as we see them:

- The BACB is accountable to an external entity that employs standards derived from extensive case law and best practices in professional credentialing. That lends credibility and prestige to the BACB credentials.
- The NCCA accredits a wide range of professional certification programs. It is well-respected. NCCA-accredited credentials are accepted by many regulatory bodies and funding sources. In the course of APBA's work on public policies to support the practice of ABA, we have found that many government regulators either already appreciate the value of NCCA accreditation, or quickly come to understand the benefit of recognizing the BACB's NCCA-accredited credentials in laws and regulations.
- To comply with the NCCA standards, the BACB must ensure that the requirements for examination eligibility and the content of the certification exams are based on input from large numbers of professional behavior analysts, collected and analyzed using objective, empirical methods. That is, the requirements for obtaining and maintaining BACB certification must reflect the consensus of the field, and cannot be changed by any small group or single organization, or in response to momentary political, social, or economic pressures. For an excellent description of the BACB's job analysis procedures, see the article by Shook, Johnston, and Mellichamp (2004) listed below. Some readers might be particularly interested in the lists of individuals who participated in the initial expert panel, survey pilot testing, job analysis review, and task list writing (Appendices A, B, C, and G in the Shook et al. article).
- Accreditation by NCCA means that the BACB program has built-in, validated mechanisms for periodically updating the eligibility requirements and exam content to reflect new research findings, current laws and

regulations, changing social and cultural practices, and other factors that affect the everyday practice of ABA.

### **Other “certifications” and certificates**

At present, the BCBA and BCaBA credentials offered by the BACB are the only NCCA-accredited credentialing programs for professional practitioners of ABA, and the only ones endorsed by APBA. When someone encourages you to pursue or endorse some alternative credential in ABA or “behavior therapy,” we suggest that a straightforward way to determine if that credential is valid is to find out if it is accredited by NCCA or ANSI. To do a more thorough evaluation, find out if the program has the other features listed previously. For some other questions to ask, see Foxhall (2000) and Shook (2005).

It is also essential to differentiate a certification that signifies qualification to practice a discipline or a profession from the “certifications” offered by developers and promoters of many assessment and intervention techniques, approaches, curricula, and programs. Unlike professional credentials, the requirements for obtaining many of those “certifications” (if there are any specific requirements) have been established by a single person or a small group of people who may not have used any systematic procedures or applied any widely accepted standards. Those same individuals may have developed the training content as well as the assessment of entry or exit knowledge and skills, if there is one, and may also score that assessment. In some cases, all that is required to obtain the “certification” is to sit through a workshop of one or several sessions, watch some videos, and pay some money. Some of these “certifications” may be legitimate in the sense that those who offer them have published research showing that specific skills are necessary to implement their technique or model correctly, and can document that demonstration of some level of competence in those skills is required to obtain the “certification.” But that is not true of all such “certifications,” and few of them are subject to quality control contingencies like those that are inherent in accreditation by NCCA or ANSI. It should be obvious that even the best of these “certifications” cover only limited sets of skills, and lack most of the characteristics of valid professional credentials.

Still another important distinction must be made between professional certifications like those issued by the BACB and certificates issued by colleges and universities. Many institutions of higher education have responded to the increased interest in ABA by offering “certificate programs” in ABA. It appears that many of those certificates can be obtained by completing one or more didactic courses, though some may also include a practicum of some kind. It also appears that some of the courses for which individuals can earn a certificate from a college or university constitute all or part of the coursework required to sit for the BCBA or BCaBA exams. Of course, completing some didactic courses in ABA does not by itself qualify one to take a BACB certification exam, much less to practice ABA professionally. And by and large, professional certifications are issued by credentialing bodies like the BACB, professional organizations, or

governments, not colleges and universities. Nevertheless, we find that certificates in ABA issued by colleges and universities are often confused with BACB certification.

### **Summary and recommendations**

APBA recommends that readers become familiar with how the BACB operates -- especially the procedures it follows to establish and revise requirements for obtaining and maintaining certification -- and how the BACB credentials differ from others. We urge readers to be very cautious about non-accredited credentials. Last but not least, we suggest that the BACB Guidelines for Responsible Conduct require BACB certificants to help employers, consumers, funders, and policymakers differentiate the BACB credentials from “certifications” offered by promoters of certain techniques and commercial products, as well as certificates issued by colleges and universities. Regarding the latter, it’s important to note that the BACB Professional Disciplinary and Ethical Standards state

*Individuals not certified by the BACB are expressly prohibited from misrepresenting that they are BACB certified as either a BCBA or BCaBA, or misrepresenting eligibility for BCBA or BCaBA certification, including misrepresentations of similar designations designed to imply BACB certification or eligibility status. **This rule will be enforced against individuals who have graduated from a certificate awarding educational program, who are not entitled to represent BACB certification until such time as they are certified by the BACB.** Applicants for certification who have previously misrepresented BACB certification or eligibility status may be subject to additional fines and penalties (\$500 for each occurrence) for the misrepresentations prior to consideration of their certification application (Standard 3iv).*

### **Resources**

Behavior Analyst Certification Board, Inc. [www.BACB.com](http://www.BACB.com)

Foxhall, K. (2000). What’s behind that credential? *American Psychological Association Monitor*, 31, 8. (available at <http://www.apa.org/monitor/sep00/credential.aspx>)

Shook, G.L. (1993). The professional credential in behavior analysis. *The Behavior Analyst*, 16, 87-101.

Shook, G.L. (2005). An examination of the integrity and future of the Behavior Analyst Certification Board credentials. *Behavior Modification*, 29, 562-574.

Shook, G.L., Hartsfield, F., & Hemingway, M. (1995). Essential content for training behavior analysis practitioners. *The Behavior Analyst*, 18, 83-91.



Shook, G.L., Johnston, J.M., & Mellichamp, F. H. (2004). Determining essential content for applied behavior analyst practitioners. *The Behavior Analyst, 27*, 67-94.

Starin, S., Hemingway, M., & Hartsfield, F. (1993). Credentialing behavior analysts and the Florida behavior analysis certification program. *The Behavior Analyst, 16*, 153-166.