

National Board for Certified Counselors: History, Relationships, and Projections

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The purpose of this article is to inform the reader of the history, relationships, and projections of the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC), which was incorporated in July 1982 and now certifies over 14,000 counselors.

During the past several years four national counselor certification processes have been organized, three offering specialty certification and one offering generic certification. Each has a primary goal of improving the profession, publishing a register of counselors it has certified. Although a register has no statutory basis, it does identify for the public and other professionals those people who have met established criteria of training and experience. This article will focus on one of those registries, the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC).

The article has five purposes: (a) to trace the history of NBCC; (b) to discuss the relationship between NBCC and the American Association for Counseling and Development (AACD; formerly the American Personnel and Guidance Association, APGA); (c) to discuss the purposes of NBCC and how they relate to states with counselor licensure laws and to other national certifying bodies, such as the Commission on Rehabilitation Counselor Certification (CRCC), the National Academy of Certified Clinical Mental Health Counselors (NACCMHC), and the National Council for Credentialing Career Counselors (NCCCC); (d) to inform readers of NBCC policies and procedures; and (e) to discuss the progress of NBCC.

HISTORY

Aaron Stills chaired the first APGA Special Committee on Registry, which developed a position statement and carried out a needs assessment at the Las Vegas APGA convention in 1979. That August, APGA President Mary Maples asked the author to assume the chair of the committee and develop three registry options for the APGA Board of Directors to consider. At its December 1979 meeting the board tentatively approved what was known as Option C, a model providing for generic counselor certification and allowing for later inclusion of counselor specialties.

At that time two specialty certification bodies already existed. Both required more specialized preparation and experience than did NBCC. A generic certification was needed for practitioners who sought national recognition but who could not necessarily meet specialty requirements. During the 1980 convention in Atlanta, the APGA Board requested a more intensive needs assessment. After consulting with APGA President Thomas Sweeney, the author developed a needs assessment survey instrument and wrote a one-page flyer to educate survey respondents about the registry concept. These materials were mailed in December 1980 to a 10% ($N = 4,062$) random sample of APGA members, with a follow-up mailing to nonrespondents in January 1981. A total of 2,229 (54.9%) questionnaires was returned.

Of the respondents, 83.5% indicated support for the establishment of a national certification procedure and 64.2% were personally interested in becoming certified as generic counselors.

Survey results were presented to the APGA Board during the 1981 convention in St. Louis. The board instructed the APGA Special Committee on Registry to begin the implementation process and, at its July 1981 meeting, appropriated funds that were loaned to establish the generic certification body. The loan has since been paid back in full.

In December 1981 a "Blue Ribbon Task Force" of several national leaders considered appropriate organizational steps, criteria, cost, legal factors, name, and potential board members and made recommendations to the Special Registry Committee. These recommendations were implemented.

Operating on borrowed money and a clear mandate from APGA, the author, in February 1982, hired a staff member to be housed at APGA headquarters. At that point APGA President Louise Forsyth began appointing NBCC Board members, who were subsequently confirmed by the APGA Board at the 1982 convention in Detroit. Members of the first NBCC Board were Lloyd A. Stone, chair, Tom Edgar, vice-chair, Thelma Daley, secretary-treasurer, Betty Hedgeman, James Messina, Carl Swanson, and, representing the "lay" population, L.C. Crouch. The board's first meeting was held in April 1982. Nancy Wallace, administrative assistant to NBCC, prepared drafts of applications and other documents for the first NBCC Board to review. At that time, on the advice of several knowledgeable professionals, Larry Loesch was appointed to develop an examination to screen applicants. Timelines were established, both for the examination's development and for the total NBCC process. After this meeting, all that remained was to incorporate NBCC and to actually implement NBCC certification.

In July 1982 NBCC was incorporated as a free-standing, not-for-profit corporation. It was no longer an extension of APGA. This gave credibility to the certifying process, because if APGA enforced the criteria it would be seen as certifying its own members. The separation also alleviated the liability of APGA; lawsuits would logically be brought against NBCC.

NBCC-AACD RELATIONSHIP

By July 1982 it was clear that housing the NBCC operation in APGA's headquarters would be advantageous to both entities. In that year NBCC contracted with APGA to rent space and APGA personnel to supervise NBCC staff. Locating at APGA also offered advantages such as access to computer service, printing, and a pool of professionals from whom skills and expertise could be obtained.

The advantages to APGA/AACD have been primarily financial (e.g., rent, overhead and supervision charges, increased computer use, examination royalties). It is also apparent, however, that NBCC has helped increase AACD membership and renewed some members' interest in AACD.

It is important to note that NBCC, unlike AACD, is not a professional organization that one may join as a *member*. Rather, it is an independent corporation with the sole purpose of certifying professionals who meet the standards necessary to qualify as national certified counselors (NCCs). It publishes a register of the counselors it has certified and formulates the necessary policies and procedures to determine whether they have maintained their certification.

Because NBCC is a separate corporation, the NBCC Board sets its own policies and criteria, and work is carried out through the contractual arrangement with AACD. NBCC and AACD are coholders of the copyright on the National Counselor Examination. Each is a separate entity, and neither has control over the other's policies or procedures.

COOPERATION WITH OTHER CREDENTIALING BODIES

Recently NBCC has cooperated with states having counselor licensure by exempting from NBCC testing counselors licensed in their state who have taken an examination as a part of licensure qualification. The same courtesy is extended to persons certified by CRCC and NACCMHC who apply for NBCC certification. At this point the cooperative relationship between NBCC and the specialty bodies is informal in that each attempts to keep the others informed and is supportive of their efforts. There seems to be no competition among the bodies, because each is unique. Some counselors desire only generic certification, others a specialty certification. Therefore, referrals from one certifying agency to another are readily made. As a certifier of generic counselors, NBCC supports specialty certification and will continue to work to establish such certification under its umbrella. It does not, however, support the establishment of state-level, nongovernmental certification. The same goal can be reached in a state by simply having persons become certified by NBCC. (NBCC does support state school counselor certification because it is governmental, though nonstatutory.)

POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

In addition to developing policies regarding its relationship with other licensing or certifying bodies, NBCC operates under a code of ethics. It is currently examining the legality of an ethical complaint relationship with the AACD Ethics Committee. A national certified counselor who believes that another such counselor is behaving unethically is encouraged to file a complaint with NBCC, thereby assisting in the self-regulation that is a hallmark of professions.

There are three options open to a counselor who wants to become certified by NBCC. First, if the applicant has a graduate degree from a program accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs and can document practicums and internships, then no professional counseling experience is required. Second, the applicant can have a graduate degree in counseling or a related professional

field from a regionally accredited higher education institution. These applicants must show evidence of course work in specified areas and at least 2 years of post-master's professional counseling experience. Under both of these options, applicants must submit transcripts, obtain two professional references, and pass the NBCC examination. Third, the applicant can be certified by CRCC or NACCMHC or licensed by a state requiring an examination. These applicants need only furnish a graduate transcript, evidence of current certification or license, and the application fee.

The NBCC examination consists of 200 multiple-choice items covering 8 areas: human growth and development; social and cultural foundations; the helping relationship; group dynamics, processes, and counseling; life span and career development; appraisal of individuals; research and evaluation; and professional orientation.

UPDATE AND PROJECTIONS

To date, NBCC has certified 14,000 counselors. This tremendous interest has greatly enhanced NBCC's financial solvency, which is important because large expenditures for examination development, refinement, and validation are yet to come. Other costly processes such as recertification and maintenance, specialty development, and the investigation of ethical complaints can also be anticipated. Moreover, NBCC has instituted a newsletter, *Newsnotes*, to keep NCCs better informed. A director of administration has been hired to further enhance and ensure NBCC's professional integrity. Finally, a register of all persons certified by NBCC in 1983 and 1984 will be published in 1985, then updated periodically.

It is obvious that the NBCC effort is already having an impact. For example, NCCs have reported obtaining third-party payments and increased credibility in providing courtroom testimony. Also, many job openings now list preferences for NCCs. The skills of counselors certified by NBCC will no doubt be kept more current as a result of the recertification requirements. These examples are very consistent with the purposes for which NBCC was established: to promote professional counselor accountability, to identify to public and professional peers those counselors who have met specific standards, to advance cooperation among groups and agencies involved in professional credentialing, and to encourage the continuing professional growth and development of national certified counselors. It is toward this end that NBCC will continue to work. With the continued cooperation and confidence of both certified NCCs and those who are yet to be certified, the ultimate success in reaching these goals is ensured.

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