The 3 C’s: Credentialing, Certification, and Certificate Programs

By Leigh Anne Starling, MS, CRC, HTR

Photo: L. Fleming, C. Kramer

More and more members of the American Horticultural Therapy Association (AHTA) are asking about credentialing. More and more employers are looking for credentialed professionals. The AHTA has set a long-term goal to establish a credentialing program. What does this all mean and how will this be achieved?

Credentialing

The term credentialing refers to the concepts of professional registration, certification, licensure, and accreditation. Through credentialing standards, an organization can establish and maintain specific knowledge, skills, and abilities for the practitioner. The credentialing process ensures that criteria have been established through researched, published, psychometrically sound, and legally defined standards. These criteria are developed through comprehensive job analysis and a defined scope of practice. The credentialing program assures that an accredited third party (the certifying body) objectively determines an individual has met the standards and criteria as defined by the professional organization that supports the credential. This is usually done through a written or oral examination.

Certification

Certification refers to a professional designation, a credential that is recognized by a professional organization. To be granted a credential, an individual must demonstrate specific knowledge, skills, and abilities that meet the criteria and standards set forth by the professional organization. Certification credentials are generally granted for a specific time period and the certified professional is generally required to maintain their credential through continuing education and professional activities. Certification is a voluntary process. In some professions, however, certification is a requirement for employment.

The benefits of certification extend to employers, employees, and consumers. Employers recognize certified individuals as having achieved a level of competence for professional practice. Certification offers employers professional standards to use as a guideline for hiring. Employees have a competitive advantage over non-certified professionals in the same field for hiring, higher salaries, and professional recognition. Consumers benefit from certification in that they are aware of professional standards which provide a level of protection from incompetent and unprofessional practitioners.

On the Road...to Olympia Washington, site of the 2012 AHTA Conference

Airports: Seattle-Tacoma (SEA) and Portland (PDX)
Trains: Amtrak Train Routes Serving the Northwest from LA to Vancouver, BC.
Buses: Gray Line of Seattle - Pacific Northwest Sightseeing Tours, Vacations,
Cars: Car rentals plentiful; Northwestern States Road Map, www.olympiawa.gov
Certificate Programs
A certificate program is an educational training program focused on a specific topic. There are three types: knowledge-based, curriculum-based, and attendance-based. Both knowledge-based and curriculum-based certificate programs require an assessment of the knowledge gained before issuing a certificate of completion. After completing an attendance certificate program, an attendee is awarded a certificate of completion. It is important to recognize that someone completing a certificate program is not certified, no credential is granted upon completion of the program. Why? Because the knowledge-based and curriculum-based assessment is narrowly defined by course content and does not represent the full scope of knowledge, skills, and abilities required to practice as a professional in a designated field. There is no assessment of an individual's knowledge of course content associated with an attendance based certificate program.

What does this mean for the AHTA? The AHTA has been exploring and working towards the goal of certification for several years. Recognizable changes have come in the form of increased academic standards and defined curriculum. The Journal of Therapeutic Horticulture has published researched articles documenting the scope of practice of horticultural therapists. The AHTA is currently following the guidelines established by the National Commission for Certifying Agencies to move in the direction of establishing a certification program for its membership. There are many steps to be taken in the process which has and will continue to involve AHTA members. Each step is focused on the primary goal of providing quality services and programs to consumers, employers and the community.

Other Resources

Leigh Anne Starling, MS, CRC, HTR is a certified rehabilitation counselor credentialed as a CRC in addition to her horticultural therapy professional registration as HTR. Familiar with clinical settings where the 3 C’s are often occupational requirements for employment, she is leading the AHTA’s efforts as the Credentialing Work Team Leader in addition to her volunteer position of Secretary, AHTA Board of Directors.