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# May I See Your Certification Please?

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**“May I See Your Certification Please?”**

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**Honors Thesis**

**Southern Illinois University, Carbondale**

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Credentialing for outdoor recreation professionals has long been a heated debate, one which holds people's lives in the balance and which has the power to shape the field for future users. In this paper, credentialing of outdoor recreation professionals will be examined in depth. Credentialing, as it will be referred to in the rest of this paper, can be individual certification, agency accreditation, or a combination of the two. First is an understanding of the methods by which individuals or agencies are credentialed. Next, the ability to recognize the basic factors that dictate the need for credentialing is required. Credentialing bodies also come in many different shapes and forms, all offering different and specific objectives. The progress of credentialing programs is a key factor that requires careful consideration. It is also important to look at how credentialing programs are established. Finally, are credentialing programs feasible? As the field of recreation continually evolves, so do the arguments and theories that surround credentialing of outdoor recreation professionals. I will attempt to explore the issue in the following paragraphs so as to better inform the public, and present my views of the issue.

#### **I. Theories Surrounding Certification & Accreditation**

The idea of certifying outdoor recreation professionals has been present as early as the Second World War, in Britain; Jack Longland and others established the Mountain Leadership Training Board, which offered a Mountain Leadership and Mountain Instructor's Certificate (Cockrell, pg 258). Paul Petzoldt worked laboriously, as did others, in the United States in order to bring the issue of certification for professionals to the forefront of the industry (Priest, 248). "Certification can be defined as a process guaranteeing that certain minimum standards of competency have been met or exceeded by a professional as evaluated by a certifying agency" (Senosk, 1977). Many certification

programs have historically examined the “hard” skills, or technical pieces that were relatively easy to train and assess such as the tangible activity, safety and environmental skills. Most certifications avoided dealing with “soft” skills, or the people-oriented pieces that were much more difficult to train and assess such as instruction, facilitation, and communication skills of leadership (Priest, 477). Simon Priest identifies another flaw of certifications: “no assurances can be made for past performance in controlled situations dictating future performance under duress” (Priest, 38). While certifications may not contain all of the answers, they “seem most successful when targeted toward addressing competence in specific technical skills (Priest, 251).

In response to the many inherent flaws with the idea of individual certification, the idea of program accreditation evolved. Accreditation is a process by which programs or agencies are granted approval from governing bodies for having met criteria established to ensure safety and competency. Accreditation assures users of some minimum agency quality. It also offers programs an independent review from outside peers in order to maintain standards. Recent U.S. surveys among outdoor recreation professionals point towards program accreditation as a preferred solution to maintain quality and safety within an agency, with over 60% of the participating agencies in favor of accreditation over certification. Accreditation has the ability to examine agencies’ practices and procedures. This was cited by polled agencies as the source of their preference for a lone solution (Priest, 249).

Though accreditation and certification are two theories on how to establish an agency or individual’s legitimacy, they both exist for the same reason – keeping individuals safe, and to provide some assurance of program quality. Even with the

increased education and number of individuals seeking certification to further their personal skills, the number of accidents every year is increasing. In 1999 the National Park Service launched a total of 4,603 search and rescue missions, many of which presumably could have been avoided with the proper training or education (U.S. News & World Report, 2000). This is the same type of education and training that is usually contained within a certification or accreditation program.

## **II. Need For Certification**

Accidents are not the only reason why the industry has been debating certification for over three decades. There are other effects of untrained individuals “leading” throngs of people through the limited wilderness that is left. Leader’s practices -good or bad- will be observed and practiced by the group. Those group members are an important audience of future independent users who may need training in safe and ethical use practices (Cockrell, 252). When un-ethical or un-safe practices are observed and later employed by individuals they are putting themselves, other users, and the environment at risk. The biggest fire of Yellowstone’s tragic 1988 fire season was started by a woodcutter who carelessly tossed a cigarette butt into the drought stricken forest, thus igniting a blaze that consumed well over 400,000 acres of land (U.S. News & World Report, 2000). It has become increasingly apparent that efforts to rehabilitate impacted wilderness soils, vegetation and wildlife populations are intensive and often have limited results (Cockrell, 252). In light of this, education and training may be a much more appealing solution, when compared to the use of restrictions and fines.

Once individuals are out in the wilderness it is important for them to exercise good judgment for both themselves and their group.

As technology and innovations continue to inundate the industry, so will greater challenge and risk levels; this calls for individuals to exercise good judgment and decision making. These skills are exactly those that are most often focused on in credentialing programs. This increased skill and challenge level is associated with escalating numbers of backcountry accidents that tax-payers have traditionally taken responsibility for (Petzoldt, 1984). During the past 12 years, a total of 1786 accidents were reported in *Accidents in North American Mountaineering*, a publication of the American Alpine Club. These accidents average out to 150 per year, and are limited to accidents which occur on ice, snow, and rock. Each accident strains the resources of the agencies that are called upon for the rescues, as well as drain the funds from public agencies. One alternative to this problem is the controversial issue known as no-rescue wilderness, proposes individuals be solely responsible for their own safety. This idea removes the burden from agencies that accredit or certify, and leaves nature as the only certifier of skill (Harwell, 1987). However, a more moderate approach of educating and assessing wilderness leaders of their judgment and knowledge could help reduce the increasing number of outdoor recreation related injuries and ease the burden that is placed upon those whom are called upon to perform rescues. Unfortunately, the Cairngorm tragedy of 1971, in which a teacher with a Mountain Instructor's Certificate led six teenagers to their death on a winter mountaineering trip, shows even certified instructors aren't accident free (Cockrell, 258).

Although certification of outdoor recreation professionals does not guarantee accident and impact free programs, it does afford users a bit of comfort knowing they are dealing with a legitimate agency or leader. Certification and accreditation programs also allow individuals or agencies to take advantage of discounted insurance rates because they reduce their risk of negligence. In a society that is becoming involved in more and more litigations every day, credentialing outdoor recreation professionals is one way to help combat negligence. More important, certification or accreditation would, likely, positively impact the effect leaders have on their participants and the practices those participants' incorporate into their outdoor ethics.

### **III. Credentialing Bodies**

In the United States, there have been three influential agencies which have focused on preparing outdoor leaders: Outward Bound, the National Outdoor Leadership School, and the Wilderness Education Association; Paul Petzoldt was involved with all three. Petzoldt was first hired as the chief instructor for the Colorado Outward Bound school, the first in the U.S. Two years later Petzoldt left Outward bound, because he felt that the school failed to educate its participants in outdoor leadership. Petzoldt then created the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) where the training of outdoor leaders was the focus. After ten years, Petzoldt was removed as an officer of NOLS due to internal business affairs. Still determined, Paul met with fellow environmentalists, university professors, and public lands administrators to discuss the need to create a formal certification system for outdoor leaders. The Wilderness

Education Association (WEA) was conceived in 1976, to provide college level training on wilderness use and education in order to create wilderness leaders.

The WEA certification is based upon an eighteen point curriculum and is only offered at affiliated universities. Affiliates are able to tailor their program to specific environments, but are still required to use the WEA standard evaluation and certification procedures. This decentralized process allows affiliates, in different climates and geographic locations, the opportunity to apply the same principles and ideals amongst students while conducting activities that are most applicable to their areas.

So far, the WEA is the only nationally recognized certification program for outdoor leaders. There are, however, other agencies which promote certifications for specific outdoor skills. One such agency is the Leave No Trace organization, (LNT) which teaches participants seven easy to remember wilderness principles to ensure good wilderness stewardship. Although LNT does little in the way of preparing individuals to lead groups of participants into the wilderness, it is a great way to teach the masses with the fundamentals of low impact wilderness use (LNT, 2005). LNT is also used as a supplement with WEA courses and is a great addition to the leadership training. There are other more intensive programs, which focus on certifying individuals in specific technical skills. A wilderness first responder, WFR, attends an intensive training course in which they individuals learn how to care for patients if they are in a delayed response environment. Students of an A.C.A. course, or American Canoe Association, can learn and be certified at varying levels of water difficulty. Similarly, the American Mountain Guide Association, AMGA, offers courses that certify



individuals as climbing instructors. All of these specialized certification programs focus intently on a narrow topic field so as to best instruct the attendees as to how to be safe and how to keep their participants safe.

It is also important to acknowledge the organizations which are accrediting entire agencies's. The most prominent in the outdoor recreation field is the American Camping Association, (ACA), which accredits a variety of outdoor recreation related facilities to ensure they meet industry standards. The ACA incorporates the peer review process to evaluate agencies practices. "The American Camping Association clearly indicates that the focal point of this accreditation sequence is to help foster safe, intelligent use of the wilderness by organized camps" Cockrell, 257). There is added value to accreditation which is evident in the networking opportunities, information sharing, and the development of skilled instructors.

Regardless of the certifying body, the benefits that are reaped from being associated with a certifying organization are good not only for the agency but the patrons as well. Nationally recognized programs also make it easier for professionals to move between jobs with out having to re-establish all of their skills. Certifying and accrediting bodies help to create a proficient instructor, and cover general outdoor leadership principles.

#### **IV. The Progress of Credentialing Programs**

Credentialing programs seem to be in a state of limbo. Simon Priest referred to certification of outdoor leaders as a "dead" issue in a paper promoting accreditation. Priest points out that the British preparation Schemes, "which began the entire

movement toward certification some thirty years ago, did away with the certification requirement well over a decade ago” (Priest, 1987). David Cockrell describes the adventure education industry as a “young, rapidly evolving field,” in which “descriptions of existing certification programs serve only as mileposts on the path to maturity” (Cockrell, 255). For all of the effort and time that is involved in developing and implementing a national certification program, it would be a shame to see it fall to the wayside decades after its inception.

This is most definitely a fear for the founders or philanthropists of certifying bodies. Even just a few years ago the WEA was the primary U.S. organization to “espouse a nationally standardized, comprehensive outdoor leadership training curriculum leading to certification” (Cockrell, 257). Currently the WEA has fifty-two affiliates offering a variety of courses throughout the United States to educate and train outdoor leaders. The ACA currently has 6,700 members, and accredits an amazing 2,300 agencies in an effort to “preserve, promote, and improve the camp experience” (ACA, 2006).

Certification programs have made some progress. Although some may say they have stalled, others continue to devote much energy to providing students the opportunities to become leaders. The concept in and of itself is still relatively new. There is much research still under-way, and the argument is open to further research and development.

## **V. Requirements of Credentialing Programs**

Assuming that a credentialing program is deemed worthwhile, it is important that such a program be all encompassing and easily replicable. The Association for Experiential Education (AEE), which represents thirty countries, and over 1,400 members, has a four phase process to accredit agencies. The first is the initial application, followed by self assessment, evaluation, and formal accreditation. Each phase is accompanied by a series of steps in order to ensure that an agency is living up to the standards that are to be expected from an AEE accredited agency (AEE, 2006). The ACA also provides clear and concise steps to establish consistency across the board.

Similarly, the WEA certification process seeks to ensure that every WEA graduate is knowledgeable in each of the eighteen points of the curriculum. The fact that every WEA graduate has experienced the same curriculum, regardless if they came from the east or west coast, enables uniformity in their certification. This is hopefully, an improvement over agency specific programs that do not have the consistency that outside standards provide. Bill March, former director of the Idaho State University Outdoor Program, suggests five standards that he feels ensure a valid certification process: 1. All assessors should be professionally trained in assessment techniques 2. All assessors should be re-assessed annually 3. All assessors should be liable for their certifications 4. All candidates must have access to an appeals process 5. Assessors should be evaluated by candidates (March, 1987). These examples are just one set of safeguards that are put into place to ensure a certification is legitimate and useful.

March goes on to say that a certification without such safeguards is, “a meaningless charade, a license to kill, and a scapegoat for the bureaucrats.” Certification of outdoor leaders is still far from universally accepted. There is however, a general consensus that employers are at least apt to consider the certified person more heavily than those not certified. Outdoor leadership certification holds promise for the field. However it seems presumptuous unless it coincides with the development of other elements of the profession (Cockrell, 253). The establishment of certifying bodies and the criteria they accredit on is bringing a new level of legitimacy to the field and its constituency. To carry forward with this success, continually developing and refining the process of accrediting should only bring the industry closer to a consensus.

## **VI. Feasibility of Credentialing Programs**

Programs such as the WEA, ACA, and AEE, provide a good outline for how certification and accreditation programs in the United States are currently laid out. However, these independent bodies barely seem to carry enough clout to sustain themselves. Therefore, I feel the solution is a two part process by which professionals in the field would be educated in the classroom, as well as receive certification for their ability to be an effective outdoor leader.

Although classroom education is fairly controversial, it offers an existing system as a means of educating potential outdoor leaders. Although supposed “real” learning is often attributed to the classroom, it is important to re-shape that idea for a student seeking to become an outdoor recreation professional. If more college systems would incorporate both theoretical discussions and hands-on

experiences; then more college graduates would enter the field with the fundamental knowledge which is necessary to become a successful outdoor leader.

With the college classroom serving as one possible solution, the other is to create a national body of which all recreation users and agencies would be aware. This agency's main focus would be to create a program that would not only accredit agencies, but also certify the skills of the leaders as well. The key component that would lead to the success of this agency would be the publicity it would have to use to establish itself as the most prominent certifying agency in the field, because once users know what to look for and what it means, it is much easier for them to make decisions. Agencies could then go through the processes of deeming their practices safe through agency accreditation, and could offer their leaders the opportunity to become certified at that agency as an outdoor leader. If the professional ever travels to another accredited agency, then their skills can be recognized because the certification was done following the outline provided by the national body.

The national certifying body could also recognize more specific certifications, by first examining that certification program and, second, evaluating its place in their national program. Then professionals would be afforded the opportunity to seek specialized certifications for specific activities, which would serve as a supplement for an already certified outdoor leader. This supplemental certification would continue to evaluate and ensure the individuals "hard," or technical skills, but would also validate the time and effort the individual is required to put forth in order to become certified.

There is no simple answer for how to go about ensuring that professionals in the outdoor recreation field truly are professional. However after reviewing the facts surrounding the issue, I have formulated a possible solution. I feel a good start would be to evaluate the degree programs that are offered at higher learning institutions and adjusting them if necessary, to incorporate both experiential and theoretical learning. Second, it would be most viable to have one centralized agency be responsible for both the accreditation and certification of professionals and agencies in the field. This centralized authority would help simplify the process and present one clear body that participants should turn to in order to establish organizations legitimacy.

## **VII. Conclusion**

The negative impacts of untrained individuals leading groups into the wilderness have been recognized for too long now. A national certification program would help curb the un-educated use of the wilderness, but may not be the unequivocal answer. To gain insight into the problem, this paper first examined the theories surrounding certification programs. Then the underlying need for certification programs in the outdoor recreation field was examined. Examples of agencies that provide certification or accreditation in the field were also presented. Next, the progress of certification programs was examined. The criteria of certification programs was also talked about in an effort to provide an example of what types of things certification programs may cover. Finally we talked about the feasibility of certification programs in the United States, and which would work best. In short, there is no cut-and-dried answer to the certification of outdoor recreation

professionals. The WEA, ACA, and AEE, are all agencies that are at the forefront of the credentialing issue in the U.S. However, a more developed program may be needed.

When recently surveyed, almost all professionals, whether they were for or against a certification for outdoor recreation professionals, indicated that the ability for a certification to attest to a person's skills that can not be directly assessed was a major flaw (Priest, 1987). These same professionals that were polled indicated that they were much more likely to support an accreditation program which would allow agencies the opportunity to meet a level of safe policies and practices. This subsequently would ensure that staff that followed these policies would be acting in a safe and educated manner (Priest, 42).

However, I personally believe that the research and data points to a much more inclusive approach to solve the certification dilemma. I believe that college curricula that cover the foundational recreation principles, as well as afford students some in-the-field time would be a good start. This college education would simply serve as a starting ground for those who wished to continue in the field of outdoor recreation on a professional level. The next step would focus on the individuals who did not attend college, or those that did and want to further their career, by becoming certified. This would require a national certifying agency, as well as organization accreditation. The universal respect this organization would receive would account for its legitimacy and promote an equal level of standards across the board. This universal agency would not only certify professionals in specific areas of the outdoor recreation field, it would also establish agency accreditation guidelines to ensure the daily practices of certified individuals were consistent with what their training was. The continual reinforcement on the agency level would help certified

individuals to fine tune their “soft” skills. Requiring both that the agency and individual carry credentials removes many of the doubts that individual certifications carry.

This is clearly an issue in the field that is far from being decided. It is critical that some program be adopted in order to assure the safety of participants and leaders alike. A certification or test can only observe so much, and much of what is observed is arguably biased by the certifier. Therefore, renewed support and interest in the credentialing programs that already exist is important to help make an immediate impact, along with the continued research and development of a viable certification program in the United States. Such a national program would help ensure that the average American could enjoy the wilderness and back country just as safely and fully as a recreation enthusiast. Not everyone can be an expert at everything, but it is important to put those that are experts, or at least experienced, in charge of people’s lives when they head out into the wilderness.



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