



# Certification Terminology

## *in the Indoor Air Quality Industry*

By Adam Andrews, CIEC

As the indoor air quality industry has developed in the past 20 years, the stature of practitioners in the field has grown. They have become respected professionals. Since every professional is defined in part by his or her credentials, the importance of certification has grown as well. The indoor air quality field now has dozens of credentialing programs, serving a multitude of niche markets and covering every aspect of indoor environmental assessment and remediation.

Consumers are often confused by this proliferation of credentials and with good reason. Many of the certification bodies now offering credentials are using the same terms to refer to vastly different processes and products. Even the word “certification” itself can mean different things depending on which organization is using it.

According to the National Organization for Competency Assurance (NOCA), one of the premier standards-setting bodies in the industry, the credentials offered as certifications by many organizations today should go by a different name altogether. In September 2008, NOCA published a standard for the development and delivery of “assessment-based certificate programs.” Standard 1100, now accredited by the American National Standards Institute (ANSI), carefully distinguishes these programs from professional certifications and explains key differences between the two.

The standard clarifies an important point of confusion that has plagued the IAQ industry for years, causing considerable friction between competing industry certification programs.

### WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

According to the NOCA standard, an “assessment-based certificate program” is a non-degree granting program that:

1. Provides a course of instruction with intended earning outcomes.
2. Evaluates participants' achievement of these learning outcomes via an examination.
3. Awards a certificate only to those who have taken the course and passed the examination.

A professional certification program, on the other hand, is a non-governmental program that:

1. Delivers an assessment based on industry knowledge, independent from training courses or course providers.
2. Grants a time-limited credential to anyone who meets the assessment standards.

As the standard explains, it is the role of training and its relationship to credentialing that sets these two types of credentials apart. Assessment-based certificate programs exist to deliver education and training. Each credential is linked to a training course by necessity—the credential is proof that its holder took the course. The purpose of a certificate program is to educate participants, and the examination is used as a mirror to show students their progress toward the learning outcomes.

Professional certifications are independent of training courses. According to the standard, “Whereas the primary focus of a... certificate program is on the provision of education/training,... the primary focus of professional or personnel certification is on assessment. Moreover, the assessment conducted by a certification program is independent of a specific class, course or other education/training program and also independent of any provider of classes, course or programs.”

With professional certification, the examination is used not as a mirror but as a screen. It separates those who meet the assessment standards from those who do not.

### DOES IT MATTER?

The distinction between certificates and certifications is important when considering NOCA’s view of the implications: In section 8, Standard 1100 stipulates that holders of assessment-based certificates may not use letters or acronyms behind their names, nor may they use the word “certified” in describing their credentials. The use of letters, acronyms and the word “certified” are reserved to holders of professional or personnel certifications as defined in the standard.

This is an extremely important development for the IAQ industry, given that many IAQ organizations today offer “certifications” that do not qualify as such, according to Standard 1100.

Most IAQ certification programs were developed by training organizations, a logical arrangement for a young field whose practitioners were still defining its limits and introducing the country to their discipline. Yet, NOCA’s standard suggests that those organizations may have been using the term “certification” too loosely and moving too quickly to add their acronyms to the IAQ alphabet soup.

NOCA’s standard does not condemn all IAQ certifying bodies, however. It confirms and codifies decisions that some IAQ groups have been making for years. Certifying bodies whose policies qualify them as certification programs under Standard 1100 include the American Board of Industrial Hygiene (ABIH), which offers the CIH designation, the American Council for Accredited Certification (ACAC), which offers the CIEC/CIE, CMRS/CMR and CMC/CMI designations, and the Board of Certified Safety Professionals, which offers the CSP designation. None of these organizations develop or require specific training courses as prerequisites to certification.

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*Adam Andrews, CIEC, is the assistant director of the American Council for Accredited Certification, a non-profit certifying body founded in 1993 to serve the indoor air quality industry. The ACAC operates independent, third-party accredited certification programs for indoor environmental consultants, microbial consultants, microbial remediators, indoor air quality administrators and residential mold inspectors. The ACAC certifies more than 3,000 professionals in the United States, Canada and overseas. For more information about the ACAC and its programs, visit [www.acac.org](http://www.acac.org).*

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### A SELF-TEST

The American Board of Industrial Hygiene (ABIH) and the American Council for Accredited Certification (ACAC) are among the only IAQ groups to achieve third-party accreditation for their certification programs. That’s partly because NOCA’s standard represents a growing trend in certification accreditation in the United States and overseas. With Standard 1100, NOCA has joined ANSI and the Council of Engineering and Scientific Specialty Boards (CESB) in prohibiting accredited certifying bodies from developing, approving or delivering certification prep courses. Since these are the only national accreditation bodies serving IAQ-related industries, it is now virtually impossible for a so-called “certifying body” that develops or requires specific training courses to earn national accreditation.

Those who are unsure whether their credentials are compliant with Standard 1100 can ask the following questions of their certification body.

- 1 Is this organization involved in the development, accreditation or delivery of certification prep courses?
- 2 Does this organization require its own prep course as a prerequisite for credentialing? Does it imply that such a course is the only way to certification?

If the answer to these questions is “yes,” then the organization should not bestow titles, initials or the word “certified” on its certificate holders. According to NOCA Standard 1100, such credentials are not certifications.