



Standard Practice for Certificate Programs¹

This standard is issued under the fixed designation E2659; the number immediately following the designation indicates the year of original adoption or, in the case of revision, the year of last revision. A number in parentheses indicates the year of last reapproval. A superscript epsilon (ϵ) indicates an editorial change since the last revision or reapproval.

1. Scope

1.1 This practice provides guidance to certificate issuers for developing and administering quality certificate programs and to stakeholders for determining the quality of certificate programs.

1.2 This practice includes requirements for both the entity issuing the certificate and requirements for the specific certificate programs for which it issues certificates.

1.3 This practice provides the foundation for the recognition or accreditation, or both, of a specific entity to issue a specific certificate or certificates to individuals after successful completion of a certificate program.

1.4 This practice does not address guidance pertaining to certification of individuals nor does it address guidance pertaining to education or training programs in general, including those that issue certificates of participation or certificates of attendance.

2. Referenced Documents

2.1 ANSI/IACET Standard:

[ANSI/IACET 1-2013 Standard for Continuing Education and Training](#)^{2,3}

2.2 ANSI/ISO/IEC Standard:

[ANSI/ISO/IEC 17024:2012 Conformity Assessment—General Requirements for Bodies Operating Certification of Persons](#)^{4,5}

¹ This practice is under the jurisdiction of ASTM Committee E36 on Accreditation & Certification and is the direct responsibility of Subcommittee E36.30 on Personnel Certificate Programs.

Current edition approved Jan. 1, 2017. Published January 2017. Originally approved in 2009. Last previous edition approved in 2015 as E2659 – 15. DOI: 10.1520/E2659-17.

² Available from the International Association for Continuing Education and Training (IACET), 1760 Old Meadow Rd., Suite 500, McLean, VA 22102, <http://www.iacet.org>.

³ ANSI/IACET 1-2013 is a valuable document with detailed guidance for all providers of continuing education and training. It provides a descriptive framework to assist organizations in adhering to quality practices for all types of continuing education and training programs. In contrast, this practice outlines a framework of quality for one specific type of program, the certificate program.

⁴ Available from American National Standards Institute (ANSI), 25 W. 43rd St., 4th Floor, New York, NY 10036, <http://www.ansi.org>.

⁵ ANSI/ISO/IEC 17024:2012 serves as a valuable standard document providing a framework of quality for personnel certification programs. In contrast, this practice serves as a framework of quality for certificate programs.

3. Terminology

3.1 Definitions:

3.1.1 For the purposes of this practice, the following apply.

3.1.2 *appeal, n*—written request made to the certificate issuer by a primary stakeholder for reconsideration of any adverse decision made by the certificate issuer related to the certificate program requisites or certificate program process.

3.1.3 *assessment, n*—instrument or method used to measure learner attainment of intended learning outcomes (including but not limited to oral or written tests, skill demonstrations, portfolios, or work products).

3.1.4 *certificate, n*—document (letter, card, or other medium) awarded to certificate holders that designates the successful completion of a certificate program's requisites.

3.1.5 *certificate holder, n*—individual who has been issued a certificate after successfully meeting a certificate program's requisites.

3.1.6 *certificate issuer, n*—legal business entity or government agency, or operating unit thereof, that has ultimate responsibility for administering a certificate program and issuing certificates to individuals successfully meeting certificate program requisites.

3.1.7 *certificate program, n*—nondegree-granting education or training program consisting of (1) a learning event or series of events designed to educate or train individuals to achieve specified learning outcomes within a defined scope, and (2) a system designed to ensure individuals receive a certificate only after verification of successful completion of all program requisites including but not limited to an assessment of learner attainment of intended learning outcomes.

3.1.8 *certificate program plan, n*—documented plan by which the certificate issuer develops and administers the certificate program, including the essential elements of analysis, program design, development, implementation, and evaluation.

3.1.9 *certificate program process, n*—all activities by which the certificate issuer establishes that a person fulfills specified requisites to earn the certificate, including but not limited to prerequisites (if applicable), completion of a learning event or events, the learner assessment(s), and the certificate decision.

3.1.10 *certificate program requisites, n*—specific requirements of the certificate program that certificate holders shall

meet before being issued the certificate including but not limited to the essential element of the assessment of learner attainment of intended learning outcomes.

3.1.11 *certificate program scope*, *n*—specific range of competencies, procedures, actions, or processes covered by a certificate program.

3.1.12 *complaint*, *n*—request, other than an appeal, made to a certificate issuer for corrective action relating to the activities of that issuer or regarding its certificate holders.

3.1.13 *confidentiality*, *n*—ability to ensure that information is accessible only to those authorized to have access.

3.1.14 *criterion-referenced method*, *n*—approach to determining a passing standard for a learner assessment based on subject matter expert-identified performance standards and not based on the performance of other students.

3.1.15 *designation*, *n*—title or trademarked label that a certificate holder is granted to use.

3.1.16 *designation acronym*, *n*—abbreviated title, usually the acronym form of the designation, which a certificate holder is granted to use.

3.1.17 *document control*, *n*—process addressing how documents are created, approved, revised and reapproved, and distributed and how obsolete document use is prevented.

3.1.18 *intended learning outcomes*, *n*—statement of what learners are expected to know or be able to do as a result of the certificate program’s learning event or program (recognizing that actual learning outcomes may or may not be those intended).

3.1.19 *internal audit*, *n*—first-party review of the certificate issuer’s policies and procedures to ensure adherence to this practice’s requirements.

3.1.20 *learning event*, *n*—combination of learning experiences designed to assess a learner’s understanding of content or his/her ability to perform a skill or set of skills that satisfies a set of learning objectives/outcomes. This event can be accomplished by any media sufficient to achieve the learning outcomes, including but not limited to, classroom instruction, distance-learning course, blended-learning activities, conferences, and satellite transmissions. **ANSI/IACET 1-2013**

3.1.21 *learning experience*, *n*—single instance of learning obtained during a learning event that demonstrates a specific learning objective or learning outcome. This could include solving a problem, completing a case study, completing a quiz, or applying a skill. **ANSI/IACET 1-2013**

3.1.22 *oversight group*, *n*—group of the certificate program’s primary stakeholders formed to develop, monitor, and approve the certificate program plan.

3.1.23 *primary stakeholders*, *n*—persons, groups, or organizations, or combination thereof, for which the certificate program is targeted or for which intended outcomes are directed or both.

3.1.24 *privacy*, *n*—ability of individuals to control access to themselves or information about themselves and thereby reveal themselves selectively.

3.1.25 *records control*, *n*—process addressing which and how records are kept, by whom, for how long, and how they are disposed.

3.1.26 *stakeholder*, *n*—any person, group, or organization with an interest in, or who may be affected by, the certificate program.

3.1.27 *term of validity*, *n*—length of time for which the issued certificate is considered valid (that is, the content is current and relevant).

3.1.28 *training and education industry generally accepted practices*, *n*—those practices that are regularly defined and cited in the training and education industry professional literature and standards.

4. Significance and Use

4.1 Certificate programs are typically offered by community colleges and universities, government agencies, employers, independent for-profit training organizations, and professional and trade associations. While quality guidelines do exist for continuing education and training providers in general (for example, ANSI/IACET 1-2013) and for entities offering personnel certification programs (for example, ANSI/ISO/IEC 17024:2012), currently, no quality guidelines exist specifically to aid entities offering certificate programs. This practice aims to change that and has been developed to:

4.1.1 Provide certificate program developers and certificate issuers guidelines for quality program development and administration;

4.1.2 Form the foundation for a recognition or accreditation system, or both, that enable consumers, employers, government agencies, and others who rely upon a skilled workforce to distinguish between qualified workers and those with fraudulent or less-than-quality credentials;

4.1.3 Assist stakeholders in differentiating between certificate programs from personnel certification; and

4.1.4 Assist stakeholders in differentiating certificate programs from other programs that confer certificates, including but not limited to certificates of attendance or certificates of participation.

4.2 Currently, it is challenging to distinguish a certificate earned through the focused learning and assessment offered through a certificate program from one granted through other means. That a certificate is issued is not a distinguishing factor. The word “certificate” is used broadly as a document awarded to designate the attainment or completion of something. An individual might receive a certificate from an education or training provider as verification of attendance at a learning event (often called a certificate of attendance) or receive a certificate as verification of active participation in a learning event’s learning experiences (often called a certificate of participation). The distribution of a certificate, however, does not indicate that the education or training program completed was a certificate program. In a certificate program, an individual participates in a learning event or series of events designed to assist him or her in achieving specified learning outcomes within a defined scope; the individual receives a certificate only after verification of successful completion of all

program requisites including but not limited to an assessment of learner attainment of intended learning outcomes.

4.3 It is also important to distinguish certificate programs from the certification of individuals. Certification is a process through which a nongovernmental entity grants a time-limited recognition to an individual after verifying that he or she has met established criteria for proficiency or competency, usually through an eligibility application and assessment. While certification eligibility criteria may specify a certain type or amount of education or training, the learning event(s) are not typically provided by the certifying body. Instead, the certifying body verifies education or training and experience obtained elsewhere through an application process and administers a standardized assessment of current proficiency or competency.

4.4 In contrast, in a certificate program the learning event(s) and the assessment(s) are both developed and administered by the certificate issuer, and there is an essential link between them. That is, the learning event(s) are designed to help participants achieve learning outcomes and the assessment is designed to evaluate the learners' attainment of those intended learning outcomes.

4.5 Also, certifications have ongoing requirements for maintaining proficiency/competency and can be revoked for not meeting these ongoing requirements. In contrast, certificates do not have ongoing maintenance or renewal requirements and therefore, cannot be revoked.

5. Requirements for Certificate Issuers

5.1 *Organizational Structure and Administration*—The certificate issuer shall be structured and administered in such a way that confidence is given to stakeholders of its authority and qualifications to issue the certificate.

5.1.1 The certificate issuer shall be, or reside within, a legal business entity or governmental agency.

5.1.2 The certificate issuer shall be an appropriate and qualified issuer of the certificate.

5.1.2.1 The certificate program's purpose, scope, and intended outcomes are consistent with the stated mission and work of the certificate issuer.

5.1.3 The certificate issuer shall have a clearly designated authority charged to administer the certificate program and ensure compliance with the provisions of this practice.

5.2 *Management*—The certificate issuer shall be responsibly and effectively managed and operated.

5.2.1 Policies and procedures of the certificate program shall be fair and equitable and comply with all applicable regulatory and statutory requirements and legal obligations.

5.2.1.1 There shall be written policies and procedures outlined to address, at a minimum, the following:

- (1) Certificate program plan;
- (2) Records and document control;
- (3) Internal audit;
- (4) Certificate issuance and use;
- (5) Invalidating a certificate;
- (6) Complaints and appeals;
- (7) Privacy, confidentiality, and security;
- (8) Program commercial support and disclosure;

(9) Fees, cancellation, and refunds;

(10) Compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act; and

(11) Nondiscrimination.

5.2.1.2 Personnel shall be assigned to implement systematically and effectively the policies and procedures within a framework that is clearly defined and understood.

5.2.2 The certificate issuer shall have sufficient and qualified personnel to conduct certificate program activities properly.

5.2.2.1 The certificate issuer shall define the qualifications for personnel involved in certificate program activities.

5.2.2.2 Personnel shall be qualified for their assigned roles on the basis of appropriate education, training, or experience, or combination thereof.

5.2.2.3 The certificate issuer shall evaluate on an ongoing basis the qualifications of personnel to perform assigned roles. Training and development plans shall be implemented where deficiencies are found.

5.2.3 The certificate issuer shall demonstrate responsible financial management and have sufficient financial resources to conduct certificate program activities properly.

5.2.3.1 Formal financial reports shall provide evidence of financial stability.

(1) Where certificate programs are one element of a certificate issuer's activities, the certificate program finances shall be a clear and identifiable component of overall reports.

NOTE 1—The financial reports should provide evidence that the certificate issuer can sustain the certificate program in conformance with the requirements of this practice for a reasonable amount of time.

5.2.3.2 Written procedures shall exist for proper financial controls.

5.2.4 The certificate issuer shall demonstrate responsible and timely communications to primary stakeholders of the certificate program.

5.2.4.1 The certificate issuer shall publish (or make available to primary stakeholders) the following information in advance of the program:

(1) Certificate program purpose, scope, and intended learning outcomes;

(2) Description of the requisites to earn the certificate;

(3) Special requirements for participation, if applicable (such as technology equipment or skills);

(4) Qualifications of instructional personnel;

(5) Fees, deadlines, cancellation, and refund policies;

(6) Academic or continuing education credit earned, specified in the terms outlined by the credit-approving entity;

(7) Commercial support disclosure, if applicable;

(8) Any changes to the certificate program purpose, scope, intended learning outcomes, requisites, and the effective date of the changes; and

(9) Statement about what inferences can appropriately be made regarding certificate holders.

5.2.4.2 The certificate issuer shall represent the certificate program and its purpose, scope, and intended learning outcomes in an accurate and responsible way.

(1) The certificate issuer shall not state or in any way imply that certificate holders are certified, licensed, accredited, or registered to engage in a specific occupation or profession.

5.2.5 The certificate issuer shall hold ultimate responsibility for the certificate program and its activities.

5.2.5.1 If a certificate issuer collaborates or contracts with other individuals or entities in the development or administration of the certificate program, the responsibility for assurance of quality and conformance with these standards rests with the certificate issuer.

(1) The certificate issuer shall have current contracts or agreements with collaborators and contractors that clearly specify the responsibilities assigned and include provisions to ensure confidentiality and prevent conflicts of interest.

(2) The certificate issuer shall ensure each collaborator or contractor is qualified to carry out the responsibilities assigned and shall monitor on an ongoing basis the performance of collaborators or contractors in carrying out assigned responsibilities in accordance with documented policies and procedures and in compliance with the provisions of this practice.

5.2.5.2 The decision to issue the certificate shall not be outsourced.

5.2.5.3 In the case in which external financial support is received in whole or in part for the certificate program, the responsibility for assurance of quality and conformance with this practice rests with the certificate issuer and there shall be documentation that no undue influence has been created because of this financial support.

5.3 *Internal Audit*—The certificate issuer’s policies and procedures for internal audits shall be understood and implemented by all relevant personnel.

5.3.1 The internal audits shall be planned and performed on a regular basis, at least annually.

5.3.2 The results of the audits, including deficiencies identified along with corrective and preventive actions, shall be communicated to certificate program management.

5.3.3 Corrective and preventive actions shall be approved by certificate program management and implemented by appropriate personnel.

5.4 *Records and Document Control System(s)*—The certificate issuer shall have a system or systems for records and document control.

5.4.1 The certificate issuer shall identify an individual or individuals responsible for overseeing the records and document control system or systems.

5.4.2 The certificate issuer’s records control policies and procedures shall be understood and implemented by all relevant personnel.

5.4.2.1 The records control policies and procedures shall address which records are kept, by whom, for how long, and how they are disposed.

5.4.2.2 Records of academic or continuing education credits granted shall be maintained consistently with the provisions specified by the agency administering the credit and any applicable national standards.

5.4.2.3 Records of certificates issued shall be maintained for a period of time beyond the term of validity printed on the certificates to allow stakeholders reasonable access to such records.

5.4.2.4 The procedures shall enable learners and certificate holders to receive verification and documentation, in an accu-

rate and timely manner, of their progress in or completion of the program, earning of academic or continuing education credits (if applicable), certificate issue date, and certificate term of validity.

5.4.2.5 The procedures shall enable stakeholders to confirm, in an accurate and timely manner, the certificate term of validity for individual certificate holders.

5.4.3 The certificate issuer’s policies and procedures for maintaining the privacy of individuals and the confidential and secure handling of information and records shall be understood and implemented by all relevant personnel.

5.4.3.1 The certificate issuer shall reasonably respect and maintain the privacy of certificate program participants to the extent possible while executing the certificate program process.

5.4.3.2 The certificate issuer shall hold in confidence and handle in a secure manner any information of a confidential nature related to or obtained from certificate program participants, learning outcomes evaluation instruments, keys, results, and related materials.

5.4.3.3 The certificate issuer shall publish (or make available to primary stakeholders) which information shall be treated as confidential and the conditions for disclosure of information to parties other than the individual providing the information or the certificate issuer.

5.4.4 The certificate issuer’s policies and procedures for document control shall be understood and implemented by all relevant personnel.

5.4.4.1 The procedures shall address the proper control of document creation, approval, revision and reapproval, distribution, and prevention of obsolete document use.

5.5 *Complaints and Appeals*—The certificate issuer’s policies and procedures for the handling and resolution of complaints and appeals shall be understood and implemented by all relevant personnel.

5.5.1 The policies and procedures for complaints and appeals shall be published and readily accessible by stakeholders.

5.5.2 The policies and procedures shall ensure that complaints and appeals are resolved in an unbiased and timely manner.

6. Requirements for the Certificate Program

6.1 *Certificate Program Plan*—The certificate program shall be created and guided by an appropriate and aligned system of analysis, program design, development, implementation, and evaluation.

6.1.1 The certificate program plan shall be documented.

6.1.2 An oversight group shall be formed to develop, monitor, and approve the certificate program plan.

6.1.2.1 The committee members shall represent a balance of interests and expertise from certificate program primary stakeholders.

6.2 *Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation*—The analysis, design, development, implementation, and evaluation of the certificate program shall be responsible, effective, and congruent with the certificate program plan.

6.2.1 The target audience and purpose of the certificate program shall be identified and documented.

6.2.2 The program scope and intended learning outcomes shall be based on the needs of the primary stakeholders.

6.2.2.1 The process by which needs are identified and linked to the program scope and intended learning outcomes shall be documented.

6.2.3 The certificate requisites shall be defined and validated by the oversight group.

6.2.3.1 The certificate requisites shall be aligned with the program purpose, scope, and intended learning outcomes.

6.2.3.2 The certificate requisites shall include:

(1) Minimum requirements for participation in the certificate program learning event or events and

(2) Minimum requirements for achievement on the assessment of learner attainment of intended learning outcomes.

6.2.3.3 The certificate requisites shall not include:

(1) Provisions for testing out of (or otherwise waiving) participation in the full or majority of the certificate program learning event or events, or

(2) Ongoing requirements for certificate renewal.

NOTE 2—Ongoing requirements are considered an essential distinction of certification from certificate programs. A certificate program facilitates accomplishment of specified learning outcomes and assesses the learners' attainment of those intended learning outcomes at a given time. As with an academic degree (and unlike certification), the certificate issuer does not track the certificate holders' maintenance or improvement of competencies over time.

6.2.4 A certificate's term of validity shall be determined based on the program's purpose, scope, and intended learning outcomes and the anticipated rate of obsolescence of the certificate program's content.

NOTE 3—The certificate term of validity will inform stakeholders of the length of time that the certificate content should be considered relevant and up to date. Any term is acceptable, including a "valid-for-life" term for those programs that cover content that is timeless. For illustrative purposes, a certificate in information technology would likely have a much shorter term of validity than one in business writing.

6.2.5 The course or curriculum shall be:

6.2.5.1 Designed, developed, and delivered by qualified personnel following training and education industry generally accepted practices for instructional design and adult learning;

6.2.5.2 Aligned with the certificate program's purpose, scope, and intended learning outcomes; and

6.2.5.3 Delivered in ways appropriate for the purpose and scope of the certificate program and the accomplishment of the intended learning outcomes.

6.2.6 The assessment(s) of learner attainment of intended learning outcomes shall:

6.2.6.1 Be designed, developed, and delivered by qualified personnel following training and education industry generally accepted practices for assessing learning outcomes;

6.2.6.2 Be aligned with and assess the extent to which learners achieve the intended learning outcomes;

6.2.6.3 Use assessment methods and delivery appropriate for and consistent with the certificate program's purpose, scope, and intended learning outcomes;

NOTE 4—The learner assessment shall be consistent with the level of the intended learning outcomes identified (that is, if it is indicated that behavior changes or results are intended outcomes, then those outcomes shall be measured).

6.2.6.4 Provide an opportunity for learners to provide feedback on the content of the assessment method or instrument; and

6.2.6.5 Have procedures in place to verify the identity of individuals being assessed and to ensure the security of the assessment instrument.

(1) The certificate program's learner assessment shall be administered with a level of identity verification and instrument security congruent with the certificate program's purpose, scope, and intended learning outcomes.

6.2.7 The scoring of the learner assessment shall:

6.2.7.1 Be designed and conducted by qualified personnel following training and education industry generally accepted practices in assessing learner outcomes;

6.2.7.2 Use methods appropriate for and consistent with the certificate program's purpose, scope, and intended learning outcomes;

6.2.7.3 Be based on a passing standard established through a criterion-referenced method in advance of the assessment being administered; and

6.2.7.4 Be guided by established and documented answer key(s), rubric(s) or other scoring guide(s).

(1) Learner feedback shall be considered in finalizing assessment answer key(s) or rubric(s).

6.2.8 The results of the learner assessment(s) shall be:

6.2.8.1 Communicated to participants in a consistent, timely, and appropriate manner and

6.2.8.2 Documented as part of the learner's record.

6.2.9 If the certificate issuer grants academic or continuing education credit, it shall:

6.2.9.1 Adhere to a uniform system of measurement and granting of credits (if deploying its own credit system) or adhere to its chosen organization's requirements for granting academic or continuing education credits (if using another organization's credit system) and

6.2.9.2 Determine and publish the type and quantity of credits granted and requirements for earning credits in advance of offering the certificate program.

6.2.10 The certificate issuer shall conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the certificate program on a regular basis.

6.2.10.1 The program evaluation shall measure the quality, effectiveness, and value of the certificate program against stated program performance objectives.

6.2.10.2 The program evaluation shall measure the quality and effectiveness of learner assessment methods/instruments.

(1) Individuals conducting learner assessments or learner assessment instrument performance or both, as applicable, shall be monitored for patterns and trends.

(2) Learner assessment methods/instruments shall be reviewed by the oversight group to verify appropriate and accurate linkage to and measurement of the learning outcomes.

6.2.10.3 The program evaluation shall provide primary stakeholders an opportunity to provide feedback on the certificate program design, content, delivery, and learner assessments.

6.2.10.4 The program evaluation shall include mechanisms to monitor and identify regularly the need for changes to the program's purpose, scope, or learning outcomes and include

mechanisms to ensure that the program is revised in a timely manner to reflect needed changes.

7. Requirements for Certificate Issuance and Use

7.1 The certificate issuer shall issue certificates in a responsible manner and inform certificate holders and primary stakeholders about proper use and interpretation of the certificate issued.

7.1.1 A certificate shall be issued to all certificate holders.

7.1.1.1 The certificate shall be issued after all requisites for the certificate are fulfilled by learners and verified by the certificate issuer.

7.1.1.2 The decision to issue a certificate shall be made by the certificate issuer based solely on the information gathered during the certificate program process.

7.1.1.3 The certificate shall be issued to an individual and shall be nontransferable.

7.1.1.4 The certificate issued shall be signed or otherwise authorized by an authority designated by the certificate issuer and shall include, as a minimum, the following information:

- (1) Name of the certificate holder;
- (2) Unique identifier;
- (3) Title and scope of the certificate program;
- (4) Name of the certificate issuer;
- (5) Designation and associated acronym granted, if applicable; and
- (6) Certificate issue date and certificate term.

NOTE 5—Often, the title of the certificate program describes the scope. If the title is not descriptive, then the scope should be described.

7.1.1.5 The certificate issuer shall invalidate a certificate only if the person it was issued to is found to have not fulfilled the certificate program requisites.

NOTE 6—Examples of circumstances that might lead to the certificate issuer's invalidation of a certificate include a learner's falsification or

misrepresentation of identity or information to the certificate issuer or participation in activities that provided an unfair advantage in meeting the certificate program's requirements. Invalidation occurs only when it has been discovered that the certificate should not have been issued in the first place. This is distinguished from revocation which is the removal of a credential (such as a certification or licensure) when the ongoing requirements of the program are not met. Since certificate programs do not have ongoing requirements, the certificate issued here is never revoked.

7.1.2 A certificate issuer may grant a designation or designation acronym, or both, to certificate holders only under the condition that the designation or designation acronym, or both, granted shall not include the words "certified," "certificated," "licensed," "registered," or "accredited" or in any other way imply such statuses.

NOTE 7—If a designation or designation acronym, or both, is granted, the following standardized format is encouraged:

Designation: Certificate Holder in (subject matter)

Designation Acronym: CH-(acronym representing the certificate designation)

Example:

Designation: Certificate Holder in Weight Management

Designation Acronym: CH-WM

7.1.2.1 If a designation or designation acronym, or both, is granted, the certificate issuer shall establish an appropriate system to track and monitor use by certificate holders.

7.1.2.2 The certificate issuer shall document, manage, and communicate to primary stakeholders the conditions for use of the certificate issued and any associated designations, designation acronyms, or other marks or logos.

7.1.3 If a digital badge is issued, the badge shall be verifiable regarding, at minimum, the certificate issuer, certificate holder, certificate purpose and scope, certificate requisites, and certificate issue date and term.

8. Keywords

8.1 certificate; certificate program; continuing education; credentialing; education; learning; training

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