

ABSTRACT

During 2001 AVA leadership designed and implemented a pilot study to review and revise its professional credentialing program. The goal of this project was to provide a more accessible, current, and legally defensible credential. Results of the pilot study demonstrated that credential candidates found the revised process more user-friendly and attainable. Based on the revision, the Certified in Volunteer Administration (CVA) credential continues to be a professional certification program that is developed and evaluated by topic experts in the field of volunteer resources management. The assessment modules are standardized, based on core competencies identified by members of the profession. The assessment modules review and test knowledge and skills in real-life situations. This includes the measurement of a candidate's ability to structure tasks, produce ideas, and solve problems. References are updated annually to reflect currency. A recertification program ensures that a CVA recipient maintains continuing professional education.

A Report on the Association for Volunteer Administration's 2001 Professional Credential Revision Pilot Study

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HISTORY

The Association for Volunteer Administration's certification program has evolved over the past several decades and is an accepted standard in the field. In reviewing the history of this credential in relation to the profession today, AVA leadership addressed questions such as, "Is the Certified in Volunteer Administration credential reflective of current practice in volunteer resources management? Are the original competencies still relevant? Is the process as accessible and user friendly as it can be? Are there ways we can make it more valuable?"

Many of these questions were prompted by the growing concern that, while interest in the credential was high, there was a significant drop-off in the number of individuals

who completed the process. Since the early 1980s, AVA had utilized a process that required extensive writing skills. Interested individuals made application to the process by submitting a self-assessment that indicated a self-score of satisfactory completion on 75% of the core competencies; a 300-word philosophy statement, and a management narrative of 1,000 words. Following notification of acceptance, the certification candidate could then proceed with the full portfolio. The completed portfolio consisted of a 1,000-word philosophy statement; three 1,000-word management narratives; a 1,000-word behavioral narrative, and a 500-word document of knowledge of the profession and a statement of career and development objectives. Also required in the career and development sec-

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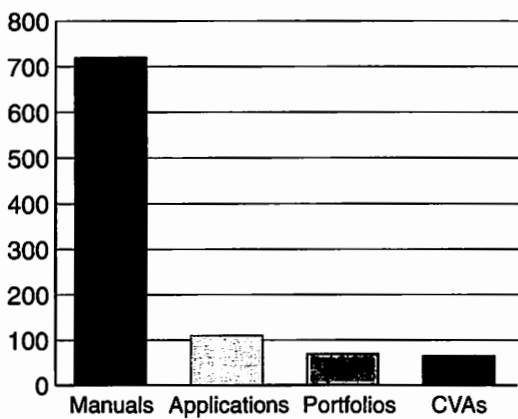
tion were one letter of recommendation and a personal assessment of the portfolio.

Figure 1 demonstrates that for the period June 1993 to October 2000, AVA received requests for 720 certification manuals. One hundred and five applications (15%) were submitted to AVA; 20 (19%) of those were deferred for reasons including insufficient length of service in the profession. Of the 105 applications, 61 (58%) applicants submitted completed portfolios. Fifty-seven of the candidates (93%) submitting completed portfolios, or a total of 54% of the 105 applicants, were awarded the credential, Certified in Volunteer Administration.

In response to the challenge of increasing

FIGURE 1.

**Credential Activity for the Period
June 1993–October 2000**



accessibility and maintaining professional credibility, the AVA Board of Directors approved an assessment and updating of the CVA credential to meet current certification industry standards for credentialing programs. The goal was to develop a current, valid, and legally defensible credentialing program that is less complex, but still meets the standards identified by AVA members as critical to the competent practice of volunteer resources management.

In September 2000, a group of 10 volunteers, all AVA members, met in Baltimore, Maryland, USA, with support from The St. Paul Companies Foundation, Inc., based in St. Paul, Minnesota, USA. The group partici-

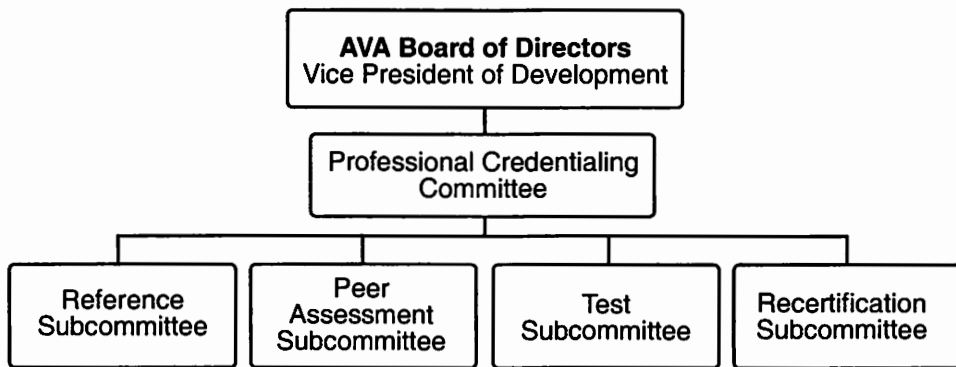
pated in a review and confirmation of the CVA job analysis study and edited the core competencies. The job analysis study and core competencies had been completed by AVA volunteers in 1996 and 1998. Nationally recognized expert in the field of credentialing, Jacqueline Callahan, CVA, from Bethesda, Maryland, USA, led the group who met in Baltimore. Callahan regularly provides consultation services to associations and organizations throughout the world as they establish, implement, and evaluate credentialing processes. As a result of this meeting, four products were presented to and approved by the AVA board of directors:

- Standards for the minimally qualified candidate
- CVA core competencies
- Key elements of the revised process (portfolio and exam)
- Committee structure for the credentialing program.

Figure 2 illustrates the credentialing committee structure. Volunteers active in the field of volunteer management staff all committees. Over 50 volunteers contributed their knowledge and experience to the credential revision process. Volunteers working together demonstrated the viability of the committee's performance as an action structure in making decisions that promoted shared responsibility of problems, in confronting and prompting change, and in initiating and sustaining reform efforts over time.

Since October 2000, the Professional Credentialing Committee has continued to develop additional pieces of the credentialing process, which will accomplish the following:

- Retain the peer review process
- Include a standardized measurement to reduce subjectivity during assessment
- Increase accessibility for all eligible candidates
- Ensure portability and flexibility, for ultimate application worldwide
- Remain current and credible

FIGURE 2.**Credential Committee Structure**

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- Be competency and performance-based
 - Reflect the standards and best practices of the profession.

In February 2001, the Test and Peer Assessment sub-committees again met in Baltimore, sponsored by the St. Paul Companies Foundation, to develop the multiple-choice examination and clarify guidelines for review of the portfolios. As a result of that meeting, the CVA Assessment Process was finalized and prepared for testing in a pilot study. In its present form, the performance-based CVA program consists of a two-part measurement format to capture a candidate's knowledge and application skills based on practical experience. More specifically, the two components are:

Portfolio — The portfolio is equal to 50% of the passing score. It includes a Philosophy Statement of 500 words and a Management Narrative of 1,000 words based on CVA Core Competencies.

CVA Examination — The examination is equal to 50% of the passing score. There are 80 multiple-choice questions based on a case study model. All questions are documented to the primary references, and all scores are identified as pass/fail.

Candidates must pass both components in order to earn the CVA credential.

**IMPLEMENTATION
OF THE PILOT STUDY**

In order to test and evaluate the new credentialing process, a pilot study was conducted from January 30, 2001 to July 30, 2001. Forty-three individuals qualified and were accepted into the pilot study based on the following eligibility requirements:

- Minimum of the equivalent of three years of full-time experience related to volunteer resources management (salaried or non-salaried)
- Minimum of 50% of current position related to volunteer resources management
- Two letters of professional recommendation from supervisors and/or colleagues.

Candidates received a Pilot Study Handbook and Reader to guide them through the pilot study. The handbook included general information, the CVA syllabus, "Tools To Help You Succeed," and information about recertification. The primary references, those texts that provided the correct answers to the multiple-choice questions, were the following:

- *Volunteer Management: Mobilizing all the Resources in the Community*, by Steve McCurley & Rick Lynch. Downers Grove, IL: Heritage Arts Publishing, 1996.
- *From the Top Down: The Executive Role in Volunteer Program Success* by Susan J. Ellis. Philadelphia: Energize, Inc. 1986.

- *Measuring the Difference: A Guide to Outcome Evaluation for Volunteer Program Managers*. Melissa Eystad, Managing Editor, Minnesota Department of Human Services. 1997.
- *The AVA Vision and Mission, Values Statement and Goals and Objectives*.
- *Professional Ethics in Volunteer Administration*
- *The Journal of Volunteer Administration* (Spring, 1998). Managing the Impact of Organizational Change on Volunteers by Arlene Grubbs
- *The Journal of Volunteer Administration* (Summer, 1997). Strategic Visioning in Non-Profit Organizations: Providing a Clear Direction for the Future by James J. Rice

All primary references will be updated annually by the Reference Subcommittee in order to maintain the currency of the credential.

Two conference calls were conducted to provide support to the pilot study candidates. The Credentialing Committee's Peer Assessment Chair facilitated the first conference call which focused on the portfolio assessment component. The Test Subcommittee Chair conducted the second conference call and provided an introduction and overview of the examination. Audiotapes of both calls were made available for purchase by candidates unable to participate in the conference call.

The examination was held May 23, 2001 from 1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m., local time; proctored exam sites were coordinated for the candidates. Twenty-six local sites were organized, and individuals proctoring the exam were given clear guidelines for the site and their responsibilities. The intent was to make the exam site as convenient as possible, without long distance travel for candidates.

REVIEW AND ASSESSMENT OF PILOT STUDY PORTFOLIOS AND EXAMINATION

Based on guidelines agreed upon in February 2001, peer reviewers provided evaluation

and assessment of the pilot study portfolios. Detailed descriptions of the review criteria for both the Philosophy Statement and Management Narrative were provided in the Pilot Study Handbook. The following criteria was used to review the Philosophy Statements:

- The author communicated a personal commitment to volunteerism, volunteer administration, and the profession.
- The author demonstrated an understanding of the impact of volunteerism in today's world.
- The author communicated his/her thoughts, feelings, and ideas in a clear and concise manner.

The following criteria was used to review Management Narratives:

- Clearly demonstrated the author's leadership role in a program or project within the past five years.
- Demonstrated the author's knowledge and application skills required for competent practice in three of the five following areas:
 - Commitment to the Profession
 - Planning and Conceptual Design
 - Resource Development and Management
 - Accountability
 - Responsiveness and Perspective
- Showed evidence of cohesion between the author's philosophy of volunteerism and the author's actions.

Six individuals served as judges to review the cut score study for the examination in May 2001. The rationale of the cut score study was based on The Angoff Method as described in The National Organization for Competency Assurance (NOCA) Handbook (1996). The minimally qualified candidate (MQC) for this study was defined as a volunteer resources staff member with three years of volunteer resources management experience. Participants in the cut score study determined the following:

Estimates of Percentages of MQCs

Answering the Item Correctly:

There was little variation in the results of the cut score study. The items on the pilot test with some variation hovered around 80%; the lowest test item average was 70.9% and the highest 90.4%. The average for the total test was 80.7%.

Estimates of Percentage of MQCs

Passing the Examination: Estimates of the six judges varied from 70% to 85%; the average was 80%.

Following the examination date of May 23, 2001, Credentialing Committee members participated in conference calls to:

- Review the cut score study and determine the number of items required to pass
- Determine items with poor statistics and which, if any, should be credited to all candidates because the item was faulty
- Review candidate comments and potential impact on questions
- Determine passing score for the exam.

During these calls, Credentialing Committee members were provided a detailed review of examination statistics and comments made by the pilot participants about the exam. The statistics were reviewed based on the number of responses equal to the percentage of total population answering each option; percent correct/total number of population answering the question/item correctly, and high scorers. Five items revealed poor statistics, indicating there was a significant problem with the items, and all examinees received credit for them. All items were reviewed and discussed accordingly. The final result of the cut score study process established a passing score of 78.8% for the CVA exam.

RESULTS

Of the 43 candidates participating in the pilot study, 39 candidates completed the entire process. Of those, 27 candidates passed both the portfolio and examination components and received the CVA credential. Eight candidates did not pass the examination; two candidates did not prepare successful portfolios, and two candidates failed both the portfolio and examination components.

Four candidates did not complete the process. Two candidates took the examination but did not submit a portfolio, and two candidates were granted requests for deferral.

The examination and candidates' results were analyzed carefully. Detailed information regarding candidates' years of experience and item (exam question) responses were reviewed. High scorers (80% or above) had 9.8 years of experience (11 individuals). The two top scorers had 11 and 9 years, respectively. The total exam pool had 8.7 years of experience. One individual had three years of experience, and another had four years.

Following the July 2001 conclusion of the pilot study but prior to announcement of the results, all pilot study candidates were invited to complete an evaluation of the process. The following summary of comments represents the recurring issues addressed by the candidates.

Written Materials:

- All of the texts are great resources
- Please try to make texts available from the AVA office
- Excellent selection of reading materials
- Combine materials into one comprehensive study guide
- Info content was comprehensive. I would suggest a broader range of reading materials
- The Statement of Professional Ethics flow chart was extremely helpful in understanding, in detail, the core ethical values.

Conference Calls:

- Overall, the calls were a formal chance for us to hear that everyone was experiencing and feeling the same things.
- Very useful! I enjoyed them and learned ideas on how to prepare more effectively.
- The responses were straight-forward, thoughtful, and very professional.
- Good processors with empathy, well-handled.
- Copies were only just so helpful.
- I liked the open communication — felt free to ask questions.
- Perhaps several calls per subject at different times to accommodate different schedules.
- Besides the subject of the call, an agenda of what will be discussed and who the speakers will be would be helpful.

Exam and Exam Sites:

- Thanks to everyone who provided local exam sites! Cannot stress enough “Do not go back and second guess. Your first gut answer is most likely right.”
- Consider having testing across the nation at Eastern Standard Time. This is so as not to have even the slight suggestion that someone in New York could divulge information across the time zones.
- It is not what is taught in school although the graphic process is the same — just terms and explanations that are different.
- A question or two were not complete and I was unsure of what you were actually asking.
- Site, time and proctor were great! I was pretty stressed about the test, but it wasn't as difficult as I expected overall.
- Good exam. Did not know exactly what to expect for difficulty of questions. The questions were very thought provoking and well organized. I took the full time to write and proof read. It was good to know what type of questions would be asked.

Portfolio:

- The philosophy statement was the most difficult part of the portfolio. My philosophy on volunteerism is so internalized, but pulling it out, verbalizing and putting it in writing is so important in helping us all better communicate to others the importance of what we do.
- I appreciated the strict guidelines on what you expected. It gave me structure to work within. I enjoyed this process much more than I expected.
- Very detailed — loved the examples.
- The format and instructions were clear.
- This was the most thought provoking part of the program. I did enjoy putting my thinking cap on.
- Excellent exercise to take a look at what I believe and why. I enjoyed analyzing the project I had done — learned a great deal from doing it.
- Not easy to write which made me have to really think about my philosophy, values, and beliefs. Wonderful experience — thanks so much!
- Worked fine. Tough to stick to word count but it did help tighten things to the bare necessities.
- I was surprised to find that the amount of writing had been cut dramatically.
Candidates' results of the pilot study were distributed on July 27, 2001. Candidates who were not successful in the pilot study were encouraged to seek additional support and continue their efforts towards professional certification. Successful candidates were provided news releases for distribution to local media regarding their credentialing. Letters of acknowledgement to key supervisors and employers were provided for all successful candidates requesting them.

IMPLICATIONS

This article described a successful pilot study project designed to revise AVA's professional credentialing program. However, to sustain the revision effort and the professionalism of the volunteers associated with the process, several key logistical issues need to be addressed. Considerable administrative time was involved in delivering the credentialing program. AVA leadership now must determine how volunteer, staff, and administrative structures will be coordinated. These include:

- Database management of credentialing data and records
- Ongoing analysis and evaluation process of credentialing data
- Committee staffing and volunteer responsibilities
- Implementation schedule for timelines and recognition efforts
- Ongoing communication with certificants and applicants
- Implementation of a recertification program that will benefit CVAs and the field
- Identification of short- and long-term funding for the credentialing program.

AVA leadership will not be without a historical perspective for assigning these responsibilities. As the credentialing program has evolved, AVA volunteer leaders have accepted key roles in its development. The resources established by these processes will facilitate new leadership. During the revision process, care was given to balance the input of individuals who had recently achieved certification with that of individuals who understood and had experience with the certification history of AVA.

In addition, many individuals who received certification through the pilot study have expressed willingness to serve in one or more of the volunteer opportunities associated with the credential. A mentoring subcommittee has been proposed as a new component for the credentialing structure. For some time, mentors have been available to candi-

dates; however, a renewed emphasis will be placed on the delivery of this volunteer service in a quality, consistent manner responsive to the revised process. Pilot study participants have enthusiastically responded to the opportunity to serve as credentialing candidate mentors and coaches.

Results of the pilot study verify that the credential is now more user-friendly and can be attained in a much shorter time period. The credibility of the credential, as compared to industry standards, has been heightened. Candidates' success may be credited to the excitement of participating in a pilot study with clear and immediate deadlines; significantly reduced writing requirements, and the availability of support via conference calls and credential committee personnel. The study demonstrated AVA's responsiveness to its membership in delivering a revised credential. Further, the study supported the use of an equally balanced, two-component process.

To build upon a renewed sense of enthusiasm for the process and maintain the progress, AVA faces the challenges and opportunities of delivering a complex and professionally vital credentialing program. Deliberations during the revision process reinforced that regardless of service focus, volunteer resources managers who are connected to opportunities for development and recognition of professional knowledge and experience are better equipped to lead and achieve the rewards of a job well done.

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