American College of Sports Medicine Certifications: establishing a profession while supporting individual and societal health through exercise

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Summary: Exercise practitioners are becoming increasingly aware of the advantages of maintaining professional credentials. In efforts to ensure quality, reduce liability, and remain competitive, more and more employers are requiring professional certification of their exercise staff. Additionally, in efforts to improve public safety, mandates for certification by state and/or regulatory agencies (e.g., licensure) as well as third party payers now exist.

ACSM certifications: The Committee on Accreditation for the Exercise Sciences (CoAES) under the auspices of the Commission on Accreditation of Allied Health Education Programs (CAAHEP) now validates and accredits university curriculum in the exercise sciences (i.e., standardized skills development). The National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA) provides a standardized, independent, and objective third party evaluation of examination design, development, and performance to ensure certification integrity (i.e., skills validation). ACSM and other organizations such as Clinical Exercise Physiology Association (CEPA), a member of the ACSM affiliate societies, have created professional communities that advocate specifically for the interests of exercise and fitness practitioners.

ACSM certification development: The process of developing a certification exam begins with a job task analysis (JTA). The purpose of the JTA is to define the major areas of professional practice (i.e., domains), delineate the tasks performed “on-the-job,” and identify the knowledge and skills required for safe and competent practice. The domains are subsequently weighted according to the importance and frequency of performance of their respective tasks. The number of exam test items is then determined based on the domain weight. Each exam reflects the content and weights defined by the JTA. By linking the content of the exam to the JTA (e.g., what professionals do), it is possible to ensure that the exam is practice related.

Exam development continues with question writing. Content experts representing academia and practice are selected and trained on examination item writing. This exam writing team is charged with the task of creating test items that are representative of and consistent with the JTA. Passing scores for each exam are associated with a minimum level of mastery necessary for safe and competent practice. Setting passing scores in this manner ensures that qualified candidates will become certified regardless of how other candidates perform on the exam. The required performance domains for each ACSM certified specialists are as follows:

**Health Fitness SpecialistSM (HFS):** Health and Fitness Assessment, Exercise Prescription and Implementation and Ongoing Support, Exercise Counseling and Behavioral Strategies, Legal/Professional and Management.

**Clinical Exercise SpecialistSM (CES):** Patient/Client Assessment, Exercise Prescription, Program Implementation and Ongoing Support, Leadership and Counseling, Legal and Professional Considerations and Management. Requires bachelor degree in exercise science.

**ACSM Registered Clinical Exercise Physiologist® (RCEP):** Clinical Assessment, Exercise Testing, Exercise Prescription, Exercise Training, Education and Behavior Change, Program Administration, Legal and Professional Considerations and Clinical Assessment. Requires master degree in exercise science.

The Bottom Line: Most recently, ACSM has taken a proactive and visible role in advocating for issues related to our profession both at federal and state levels. ACSM has provided public comment to proposed changes to the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services' national coverage policy for cardiac rehabilitation.

ACSM certainly understands its influence as an industry leader and its organizational responsibility to move ahead cautiously on issues related to public policy. What should not be overlooked, however, is the individual responsibility of each of us to create our professional community. Through the efforts of dedicated volunteers, a framework for professionalism exists. Important first steps are to become credentialed in a manner that support the health of your own country, as well as to encourage your colleagues to do the same. Only through the concerted efforts of qualified individuals coming together in a united front will our profession advance.