

# Professional Certification: The Practical Side--To Be or Not To Be

by Randal J. Givens

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The level of civility of a society is largely dependent upon the extent to which the society manifests philanthropic tendencies. The measure by which we tend to identify a culture as more or less philanthropic is the relative degree of the society's trust, reciprocity, concern and care for the society as a whole, as well as for the individual members of its communities, in particular those who are in some manner less able or unable to care for themselves. In America, this societal caring is manifested through a three-sector structure: the governmental, the for-profit, and the non-profit sectors. The non-profit or philanthropic sector's activities have been facilitated by the tax reform act of 1969 and its subsequent amendments, including the new legislation of 2003. It is historically unique and exciting to see the level of legislation for, employment in, and financial support of the broad philanthropic sector.

As discussed in previous articles by this author, the nature and identity of the modern American grants professional is contextualized by three key factors. These include the historical development of institutionalized philanthropy, the legal and sociocultural environment, and the "professionalization" of the job/activities. These factors have engendered a nationally unifying movement toward greater effectiveness and service to society (Givens, 2002, pps. 1-4) and (Givens, 2002, pps. 28-37).

This article will examine the grants professionals' ultimate value to society, evaluating it on the basis of our utility to the facilitation of the philanthropic process. Our "boundary-spanning" organizational functions are currently evaluated from a number of different angles. However, the lack of a standardized, commonly accepted evaluation process puts in doubt the potentially positive perception that grant professionals anticipate. In the long run, the pragmatic utility of grant professionals to society will be measured on the basis of the perceptions held by those who use our services. Their perceptions tend to be based largely upon their experiences with isolated individuals. Currently, there is no standardized, commonly accepted method by which these employers (or anyone else) can gauge, *a priori*, the potential "quality" of any given grants professional. This is because, unlike many other professions, there is no national certification/credentialing process objectively identifying professional competencies.

In a recent article, Deanna Nurnberg provided a good discussion of the notion of professional competencies (Nurnberg, 2003, pps. 25-27). To pursue those thoughts we should note that the word “credential” includes two categories. The first is the more formal, which includes those credentials given by government agencies, and which are mandated by law for certain professions (these credentials will not be the focus of this article). The second category includes those credentials, often in the form of a certificate, which are given by some individual or organization on their own authority, indicating that the recipient has their blessing/sanction to be or to do a certain thing (such as a national grouping or association of professionals, which identifies what constitutes responsible practice, etc.). This is the type of credentialing addressed in this article, as it relates to AAGP.

The theoretical debate over this topic of credentialing/certification will undoubtedly continue in various disciplines for some time (be they certified by the government or certified by some national independent group of like-minded professionals). However, at this juncture in the evolution of the grants profession, it is perhaps more helpful and personally satisfying to examine the question “To be [credentialed] or not to be [credentialed]?” from a purely practical and pragmatic point of view. In an attempt to examine this question, we will now look at three different credentials/certifications. We have sought information from three AAGP members who are also involved in other professional areas, i.e., fundraising (Michael Wells), social work (Paula Maloff) and sign language interpreting (Pauline Anarino). Each will tell their own story, pursuing the following outline guide:

1. Self Introduction
2. The Credential
  - a. Credential background
  - b. Reason for seeking the credential
  - c. Credential acquisition
3. The impact the credential has had.
4. The potential value of a “grants” credential

## **CFRE: Michael Wells**

**1. Self Introduction** -- “My name is Michael Wells. I am a grantwriting consultant in Portland, Oregon. I am involved in researching, developing and writing grant proposals primarily for social service nonprofits, mostly in the Portland area. I have been doing this for about 15 years.”

### **2. The Credential**

**2a. Credential background** — CFRE (Certified Fund Raising Executive). “When I first received the credential, it was from NSFRE (National Society of Fund Raising Executives), which is now called AFP (Association of Fund Raising Professionals). CFRE International has since broken off as an independent organization. They give this distinction to experienced development/fundraising professionals to provide them with a credential in a field where there are no degrees, etc. This is to ‘set them off from the crowd.’”

**2b.** Reason for seeking the credential — “Basically I got it for fun, to see if I could pass the test, and for professional reasons (see # 3, below).”

**2c.** Credential acquisition — “I sent in an application showing my education, (formal and continuing education), professional practice (a minimum of five years in the profession), performance (a minimum of \$1,375,000 raised), and service (the professional groups or volunteer work I had done). Then there was a multiple choice test. To remained credentialed, I recertify every three years with the same standards, but lower numbers.”

**3. *What impact has it had on you*** — “That is hard to say. As a consultant, I deal with executive directors and development officers, some of who know what CFRE means. It may add a little credibility when talking to a new client, although they’re more interested in my experience and success rate. If I were job-hunting (never again, God willing), I think it would be more useful. It’s also a merit badge to show off (on my business card) when talking to peers.”

**4. *Your feeling about the potential value of a “grants” credential*** — “CFRE, as we know, puts very little emphasis on grants. They’re much more oriented to individual giving, major donors, planned giving, etc. A grants credential would probably be of more use to me, since all of my work is grant-related. I think it would establish me as a professional, in a field where anyone can say they’re a grantwriter (I have students in the three-credit college course I teach who ask if they can start consulting as a result of taking the course.) For prospective clients, I think there’s a comfort level in having a certificate that shows someone else has approved my work, even if they don’t know what it means.”

## **ACSW: Paula Moloff**

**1. *Self Introduction*** -- I am Paula Moloff, the grants coordinator for the city of Glendale, Arizona. I have worked for the city as a grant developer, writer and citywide coordinator for almost a decade. I have a BA in American History, a Masters in Social Work from the University of Nebraska at Omaha, and a Masters in Business from the University of Northern Colorado. Prior to being in the grant field, I managed and developed HO’s and PPO’s, but started my career as a medical social worker.

**2. *The Credential*** -- My credential is an ACSW (Academy of Certified Social Workers) issued by the NASW (National Association of Social Workers). At the time it was awarded, it was the highest level of professional credentialing available. I wanted it because I thought it was important to have that status in the medical field where I was working with doctors, pharmacists, nurses and other degreed professionals, and I found that to be true. I took a national test and had to also provide proof of two years of work supervised by an ACSW.”

**3. *Reason for Seeking the Credential*** -- When BA Social Work programs came into existence, individuals with ACSW’s were able to obtain better jobs and salaries while those with MSW’s only were classified in the same category as BSWs. In addition, in

those states that licensed social workers, ACSW's were allowed to grandfather. Medicaid and Medicare also eventually accepted billings from ACSW's as professionals, while non-ACSW's were required to submit their claims under other professionals.

**4. *What impact has it had on you*** -- Social work has always been considered a low status or no status profession. ACSW's were and still are considered a step above BSW's and MSW's who did not have to pass a national credentialing exam and meet specific criteria. I maintain my ACSW even after two decades of not practicing because I am proud of the accomplishment. Credentialing raised the performing bar for all social workers, and opened the door for state and Federal recognition of social workers as the professional equivalent of psychologists. Without a credentialing program, NASW would never have succeeded in gaining acceptance of licensure by state governments. Licensure has been essential in keeping reimbursement and salaries at reasonable levels and elevating credentialed/licensed individuals above those without comparable achievement in the profession.

**5. *Your feeling about the potential value of a "grants" credential*** -- I feel that since we do not have an identifiable advanced degree (e.g., Masters in Grants Development) or clearly defined body of knowledge that would "identify" us as professionals, credentialing is even more important to the development of a professional identity in the community and the job market. We may say we are professionals with special and identifiable skill sets, but we are not recognized as such outside our own peer circle, and until we are recognized we will continue to see salaries and job descriptions that define us as glorified administrative assistants. Credentialing--both developing the credentialing process and having a credentialing program in place--will help elevate our profession in the public and among employers. That was certainly the effect of ACSW certification.

## **CRC & RID & ACCI: Pauline Annarino**

**1. *Self Introduction*** -- I am a native Midwesterner living in Los Angeles. Long ago in the early 70s, I earned a BS in Psychology and an MS in Rehabilitation Counseling from the University of Wisconsin system. Professionally, I have worked as a post-secondary career counselor for deaf students, headed a Disabled Student Services Department, established an Associate of Arts degree in Sign Language Interpreting, and was a Director of Program Development for a large nonprofit organization. Today, I am the Principal of Nonprofit Navigators, a small but busy consulting firm in Los Angeles. Our primary client pool consists of nonprofit organizations, public institutions and religious organizations. While we provide a wide array of nonprofit and program development services, our most often requested service is grant development."

**2a.** I currently hold three certifications: one from the Rehabilitation profession (Certified Rehabilitation Counselor—CRC), and two from the Sign Language Interpreting profession (Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf—RID, and the American Consortium of Certified Interpreters—ACCI).

**2b.** I obtained my Rehabilitation certification because the certification was highly regarded in the field and would make me more marketable. However, in just another one of life's "twists," I never entered the field, making a "left turn" into interpreting. Consequently, I professionally benefited from the credential.

My Sign Language certifications, though, were another story. When I first entered the interpreting field, the profession was very much like our grant development profession today. At the time I obtained my first Sign Language certificate, there were virtually no professional degree programs in interpreting. Most interpreters learned their craft on the job through the school of "hard knocks," very similar to many of us today who are grant professionals. I sought out certification because I believed it would help me overcome the difficulty of demonstrating skill, professionalism, and credibility that occurs when one does not have a readily recognizable degree in the field.

I obtained my certification along with some of the earliest groups of interpreters to be certified. Back then, many other interpreters believed certification to be a waste of time and money. What employer would even know what the certification meant? Why would an employer pay a certified interpreter more when there were plenty of non-certified interpreters willing to work? Would not a certification program only create division and animosity between certified and non-certified interpreters? And in the beginning, many of their concerns were indeed correct.

However, today nearly every state in the nation has enacted laws requiring interpreters to be certified. While some non-certified interpreters do continue to work, their pay is significantly less than a certified interpreter. Given the current professional climate, I suspect within five years only certified interpreters will be allowed to work in the United States."

**2c.** The process of becoming a certified interpreter is arduous. Interpreters must first sit for a written test. Upon successful completion of this portion, interpreters then complete an hour-long performance test and answer a slate of ethical questions. In the case of the RID, the interpreter is video taped and the tape is then sent to three evaluators. For the ACCI, interpreters sit before a live panel of three to five interpreters. The CRC test is an all-day written test. All three tests have rigorous certification maintenance programs that result in loss of certification if not completed and documented.

**3. *What has been the impact on you --*** My interpreting certifications are probably the most important investments I have made in this particular field. They have given me the credibility I had initially hoped for. They have opened doors that might not have otherwise been opened. Today, my sign language certifications hold the same degree of regard as my rehabilitation certification. Foremost in the eyes of employers is the prospective employee's certification. Today, certification drives the interpreting field. Because I am certified, I am not affected by government regulations requiring certification. Most importantly, though, was the "water shed" moment when I finally realized that certification was not about me but about the people I serve. Certification ensures that deaf people receive quality communication services and protection from unethical and unqualified individuals.

**4. *Your feeling about the potential value of a “grants” credential*** -- Today, there are more than 850,000 charities, 500,000 churches, 725,000 nonprofit organizations and 23,485 educational institutions operating in the United States. Collectively, the exchange of charitable dollars for goods and services represents a national gross product of more than \$1.0 billion annually. While an exact figure is not known of the number of individuals serving as the “brokers” between grant fund seekers and grant fund distributors, the number is thought to be 100,000 or more. Given the size and the scope of our field, it is inevitable that an oversight mechanism will be put into place either by government licensing bodies or other professional organizations.

We know that a fundamental role of most professional associations is to establish, maintain and advocate for professional standards within their industry. Many professional organizations develop credentialing or certification standards for their members and support independent certification by others. Developing a certification is an awesome responsibility. I believe there is no other entity out there more qualified to respond to this profession’s need for certification than AAGP, and I am willing to go so far as to say that AAGP has an obligation to the field to pursue certification.

Having been involved in the evolution of two professional credentials and having witnessed the positive growth of a profession as a result of it, I believe a grants credential is necessary if we are to elevate our profession. I also believe it is inevitable. Most importantly, as we carve out employment niches for ourselves, certification will help us keep sight of our goals and why we do what we do--service provision to entities and individuals who are trying to make a positive difference in the lives of people.

## **Summary**

The thoughts of these three professionals provide us with some insight into the practical side of credentialing/certification. Notice that there are a few common threads running through all three stories across a wide spectrum of fields. Clearly, the notion of independently established credibility stands as one of the main motivations for seeking certification. This credibility tends to be used as a “professional merit badge” for the reason that the certificate may be the only authoritative independent measure available by which to determine the amount of experience and the level of knowledge possessed. Such is especially true in fields which have no corresponding standard academic degree available. Like many things, credentialing/certification often ends up being a comparative concern between professions. For those who work in fields where others are routinely certified by their profession, certification tends to be seen as a very important issue. Hence, on the most practical level it is, or may well become, a simple question of job marketability.

Inescapably, our jobs as grant professionals impact three domains--ourselves as respective individuals, the “clients” for whom we “work,” and the society in which we live. The small sampling of professionals in this article indicates for these people the practical utility of credentialing in all three domains. It appears to this author that such a conclusion is likely quite generalizable to the larger population of grant professionals. Therefore, perhaps the answer to the question of “To Be or Not to Be?” is that it at least appears to be more comparatively advantageous to be certified than to not be certified in the increasingly professionalized world we inhabit.

## References

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