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CERTIFICATION OF FINANCIAL AID PROFESSIONALS

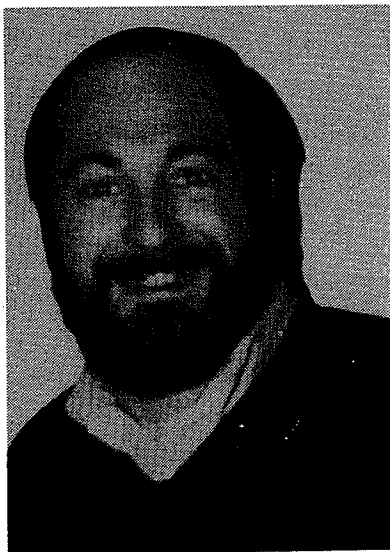
Donald R. Moore

In two recently published articles in *The Journal of Student Financial Aid*, concepts and taxonomies have been identified and proposed for the education, certification, and accreditation of financial aid professionals.¹ In October of 1974 the thematic concept of the New York State Financial Aid Administrators Association centered on this problem in its workshops and group meetings. The National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators has established a committee to deal with this problem.

As a professional in the field, I believe this is a critical matter which should be resolved in the near future so that a systematic process can be established to certify all qualified candidates. Various study groups have approached this problem from directions other than the one which seems to hold the most promise and which seems relevant to the various duties carried out by the financial aid professional.

The *NASFAA Newsletter* of November 15, 1974, outlined four essential criteria for a professional to be qualified for certification. These criteria are:

1. Three years of experience in financial aid administration;
2. Current membership in a financial aid association.
3. Formal training or academic preparation in an area relevant to the profession.
4. Recommendation of the state certification committee.²



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Besides these criteria, the NASFAA Committee on Certification indicates that there are certain attributes which the financial aid professional should possess. In general terms these include counseling, administrative, communicative, and research and evaluation skills. And the candidate "should show evidence of professional development."³

Delaney et al. and Schiesz in recent *Journal* articles identify criteria to be included in the formal training of financial aid professionals and the strengths and weaknesses of financial aid professionals in the field. Although the NASFAA Committee on Certification and the authors of the two articles withhold the academic terminology, much of what is discussed points in the direction of a competency based model of certification. Obviously, this terminology borrows from our academic colleagues, but when has anyone declined to borrow a good idea. Besides, discussions in which many of us have participated called for us to follow the academic approach; the development of a body of knowledge, basic core course work, and research methodology have all been proposed as ways by which we, as a group, can advance our professionalism.

Let me, for a moment, challenge some of the precepts of the academic route as well as the four basic NASFAA criteria. Many of us have come into this emerging profession by diverse routes. Some have standard academic backgrounds in the liberal arts, others have preparation in guidance and counseling, and still others have business backgrounds. Let us ignore the diversity of subject matter preparation and assume that certain degree plateaus prepare one for the profession as well as a specific degree might. Let us say, first, that a bachelor's or master's degree is required for entrance into the profession and ignore the question, in what field?

Secondly, three years of experience may not be necessary to attain some degree of proficiency in financial aid administration especially in an entry level position. This NASFAA criterion could be softened.

Thirdly, state certification committees may be too many and too cumbersome. As I will develop later, regional committees may be able to do the work sufficiently well at present. If necessary at a later time, state committees could be established to function under the direction of these regional committees.

Competency or Performance, the words are interchangeable, Based Teacher Education (CBTE) is now the catch phrase in teacher preparation programs. Evidence has been presented indicating that formal course work combined with a semester of apprentice teaching does not guarantee a successful teacher. Until more research is done, no evidence exists proving that CBTE guarantees success, but the expectations are high.

Cutting through the rhetoric, Competency Based Teacher Education is an attempt to identify competencies for which a teacher of a specific subject is responsible and to measure the teacher's capability in these competencies. Before the teacher can be permanently certified, all competencies necessary to satisfy the job requirements must be met. No assumption is made that specific course work satisfies these competencies unless they are built into the formal educational program that the student completes.

Theoretically, the program sounds logical, but how does it translate into a viable certification program for financial aid professionals? First, I believe that we have to ignore specific formal course work and assume that minimum criteria for entry levels or other levels are satisfied by degrees. For example, we may require directors of programs and assistant directors to hold a master's degree as a minimum criterion and professional staff below this level to have a bachelor's degree. Or, educational criteria might be related to college or university size, i.e. at colleges of 10,000 or more students, a master's degree plus 30 hours in advanced subject matter might be required of the program directors and a master's degree for assistant directors. Once we have decided on the basic minimum criteria, we can then begin to identify the competencies involved in satisfactorily performing functions.

Initially, we should identify those minimum competencies required of all financial aid professionals be they counselors, advisors, assistant directors, or directors. This is a brain storming task of listing all the competencies required to function effectively in the field of student financial aid. After the list is obtained, we then group these items under several broader headings to identify the larger competing ones. For example, we may develop a list of the following competencies:

1. Works effectively with students.
2. Works effectively with parents.
3. Works effectively with faculty.
4. Works effectively with colleagues.
5. Understands needs analysis.
6. Understands and has a knowledge of federal and state aid regulations.
7. Attendance at a computation school or workshop.
8. Knowledge of local and state agencies with which the financial aids office works collaterally.
9. Knowledge of packaging procedures.
10. Ability to organize and maintain adequate records.
11. Knowledge of the financial aid office in relation to its campus division.
12. Knowledge of student budgets: single, married and special students.
13. Knowledge of deadline dates for receipt of applications by the financial aid office, the Basic Educational Opportunity Grant Program, and state grant agencies.

There are obviously more competencies than included in the list, but for purposes of this discussion we will limit to the above. We can now develop general headings for groups of competencies.

A. Counseling and Interpersonal Relationships

1. Works effectively with students.
2. Works effectively with parents.
3. Works effectively with colleagues.
4. Works effectively with faculty.

B. Knowledge of the Field

1. Understands the needs analysis concept.
2. Understands and has a knowledge of federal and state aid regulations.
3. Attendance at a computation school or workshop.
4. Knowledge of packaging procedures.
5. Knowledge of student budgets; single, married, and special students.

C. Organizational and Administrative ability.

1. Ability to organize and maintain adequate records.
2. Knowledge of deadline dates for receipt of applications by the financial aid office, Basic Educational Opportunity Grant Program, and state grant agencies.
3. Knowledge of state and local agencies with which the financial aid office works collaterally.
4. Knowledge of the financial aid office in relation to its campus division.

As the minimum criteria for provisional certification in the field, these competencies would be tested and satisfied generally when one is already on the job through various means designed either by the national or regional organization, unless specifically satisfied by formal degree work. The testing of these competencies could take many forms, but, whatever form it takes, I envision it to be administered and attested by the director who would stipulate that the new professional has satisfied the minimal educational criteria and has specifically met each of the above fourteen competencies. The director would then submit a signed statement to the national or regional committee established for this purpose. This agency would then certify the professional either provisionally or without qualification as a new professional. Nothing precludes more than a one-step procedure for permanent certification.

Development of criteria for directors or assistant directors is the next step in the certification process. Assuming that these individuals satisfy the minimum criteria or at least "holding them harmless" from satisfying the minimum, we can develop distinct competencies for these professionals. Again we brain storm to arrive at the following list of potential competencies:

1. Membership and involvement in professional organizations.
2. Evidence of research or publication.
3. Knowledge and direction of staff responsibilities.
4. Development of computer use systems.
5. Ability to develop and maintain adequate record keeping systems for the financial aid office.
6. Development of appropriate information materials: student budget descriptions, award letters, and financial aid brochures.
7. Established working relationships with colleagues, faculty, and local secondary school personnel.

8. Ability to prepare timely and accurate reports including the Federal Fiscal Operations Report and the Institutional Application to Participate in Federal Student Aid Programs.
9. In depth knowledge of regulations governing federal and state programs.
10. Working relationship with campus departments: business office; payroll office; computer center; and special services office.
11. Demonstrated ability to work with groups in on-campus group meetings, financial aid presentations, and various staff activities on campus.
12. Demonstrated ability to package aid by an established priority scale which recognizes individual needs.
13. Demonstrated ability to implement financial aid policy in a consistent and equitable manner.
14. Evidence of continuing growth through attendance or participation in workshops, training programs, conferences, or formal course work.
15. Established counseling relationships with students.

As we did with the minimum criteria, we can now group these specific competencies under headings.

A. Knowledge of the field

1. In-depth knowledge of regulations governing federal and state programs.
2. Demonstrated ability to package aid by an established priority scale which recognizes individual needs.
3. Demonstrated ability to implement financial aid policies in a consistent and equitable manner.
4. Ability to prepare accurate and timely reports including the Federal Fiscal Operations Report and the Institutional Application to Participate in Federal Student Aid Programs.

B. Counseling and Interpersonal Relationships

1. Established counseling relationships with students.
2. Established working relationships with colleagues, faculty, and local secondary school personnel.
3. Demonstrated ability to work with groups in campus meetings, financial aid presentations, and various staff activities on campus.
4. Working relationships with campus departments; business office; payroll office; computer center; and special services office.

C. Organizational and Administrative Ability

1. Ability to develop and maintain adequate record keeping systems for the financial aid office.
2. Development of computer use systems.
3. Development of appropriate information materials: student budget descriptions, award letters, and financial aid brochures.
4. Knowledge and direction of staff responsibilities.

D. Continuing Professional and Personal Growth

1. Membership and involvement in professional groups.
2. Evidence of research or publication.
3. Evidence of continuing growth through attendance or participation in workshops, training programs, conferences, or formal course work.

Unlike the situation of the new professional where the director submits a signed application for certification, the question arises, who certifies the director? Regional or state certifying committees could act as screening committees accepting all requests from directors for certification, visiting the campus, speaking with appropriate people, reviewing office procedures, interviewing the director, and finally submitting a request for certification to the national certifying committee.

Once defined, modified, and fully developed, a program based upon this competency model would prove workable and effective. We can argue *ad nauseum* about specific course work in sociology, psychology, history, education, and the number of other possibilities and never arrive at consensus. If we leave these arguments to the polemicists and accept a particular degree level as satisfying minimal educational requirements, we can then attack the problem at hand, namely insuring that all practicing financial aid professionals have achieved competence in the field and that is our main concern. We need competent people administering these complex programs so we can help students safeguard the programs, and achieve a success as a professional group.

NOTES

1. Ronald J. Schiesz, "A Study of Certain Professional Characteristics of Financial Aid Administrators of Institutions of Higher Education in the State of Illinois," *The Journal of Student Financial Aid*, March 1974, pp. 25-33, and Francis H. Delaney, Gary L. Hylander, Ruth H. Karp, and Richard J. Lange, "A Taxonomy of Objectives for the Training of Financial Aid Administrators," *The Journal of Student Financial Aid*, November 1974, pp. 5-12.
2. *NASFAA Newsletter*, November 15, 1974, p. 4.
3. *NASFAA Newsletter*, November 15, 1974, p. 4.
4. For a discussion of Performance or Competency Based Teacher Education see the following:
Harry S. Broudy, *A Critique of Performance-Based Teacher Education*. American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education. PBTE Series 4, 1972.
M. Dyer, "Competency Based Teacher Education," *American Education*, 10:38-9, November, 1974.
F. M. Hechinger, "Should Teachers be Judged by Performance?," *Saturday Review World*, 1:71-72, May 4, 1974.
Bruce R. Jones, Jonas F. Soltis, and Marsha Weil, *Performance-Based Teacher Education Design Alternatives: The Concept of Unity*, American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, PBTE Series 14, 1974.
Achieving the Potential of Performance-Based Teacher Education: Recommendations, American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, PBTE Series 16, 1974.
B. Rosner, P. M. Kay, "Will the Promise of C/PBTE be Fulfilled?," *Education Digest* 39:2-6, April, 1974.
B. Rosner, "Promise of Competency Based Teacher Education," *Education Digest* 39:25-28, September 1973.
Allen A. Schmieder, *Competency-Based Education: The State of the Scene*, American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, PBTE Series 9, 1973.
P. H. Wagschal, "Follow the Bouncing Fad," *Education Digest* 40:34-5, October 1974.