

# **Volume I:**

Request for Clearance for Focus Groups for New  
Items to Measure Certificates and Industry-  
Recognized Certifications among Adults in the  
United States

1850-0803

December 1, 2009

## Justification

Recent OECD data indicate that the United States has fallen behind other nations in the educational attainment of the adult population, which has far-reaching consequences for our future economic prosperity and ability to compete globally. In his February 2009 State of the Nation address, President Obama stated an ambitious goal: by 2020 America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world. He then asked every American

“...to commit to at least one year or more of higher education or career training. This can be a community college or a four-year school, vocational training or an apprenticeship. But whatever the training may be, every American will need to get more than a high school diploma.”

The American Graduation Initiative was introduced by the President in July 2009 to directly support this goal by helping “an additional 5 million Americans earn degrees and certificates in the next decade.”

Attaining a postsecondary credential has become increasingly important for securing opportunities to get high-return jobs in the United States in the 21st century. However, NCES has traditionally only collected data on postsecondary certificates and degrees awarded through credit-bearing instruction in traditional institutions of higher education that participate in Title IV federal student aid programs. These comprise only a portion of subbaccalaureate education and training American adults seek and complete to learn the skills they need to find and keep good-paying jobs. In fact, a 2008 study using student unit record data from Florida<sup>1</sup> found that, in many cases, industry-recognized certifications have a greater economic value than associate degrees.

The importance of measuring educational attainment was underlined in a December 2000 report<sup>2</sup> from the Federal Interagency Committee on Measures of Educational Attainment:

Analyses of social and economic issues often use educational attainment as an explanatory variable. The importance of education in shaping life experiences and outcomes has been well documented in relation to health status, labor force experience, earnings, criminal activity, and participation in democratic processes as well as various income support programs. The importance accorded this measure is demonstrated by its inclusion in virtually all Federal social/demographic data collection efforts (including surveys, programmatic, and administrative data collections). Agencies that collect educational attainment data include the National Center for Education Statistics, the National Center for Health Statistics, the Bureau of the Census, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Division of Science Resources Studies of the National Science Foundation, the

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<sup>1</sup> Jacobson, L. and Moker, C. “Pathways to Boosting the Earnings of Low-Income Students by Increasing Their Educational Attainment,” The Hudson Institute and CNA, November 2008.

<sup>2</sup> “Federal Measures of Educational Attainment: Report and Recommendations,” prepared by The Federal Interagency Committee on Measures of Educational Attainment, December 2000.

Department of Veterans Affairs, the Defense Manpower Data Center of the Department of Defense, and the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Measuring progress toward the President's goal and improving how we collect data on educational attainment in the federal statistical system require a coordinated effort to define and enumerate certificates and industry-recognized certifications.

This research is intended to aid development of a small set of items that will enumerate the stock of certificates and certifications among the US adult population. These items would then become candidates for inclusion in a national household study of US adults. The focus of the current work is on industry-recognized certifications, but we will include some questioning about certificates to inform later item development in that area.

The research was recommended in a meeting held on November 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> with over 50 experts from federal statistical and program agencies including Education, Labor, and Census; representatives from the Council of Economic Advisors; representatives from foundations; and representatives from nonprofit groups spanning workforce, education, industry, and standards-setting groups

The scope of this effort includes educational certificates awarded outside of credit-bearing instruction in Title IV institutions and industry-recognized certifications, with the current focus being on certifications. Based on the discussion at the meeting on November 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> and on standards established by the American National Standards Institute, the National Organization for Competency Assurance (NOCA), and the Office of Personnel Management, we are defining "certificate" and "certification" as follows:

**Certificate:** A credential awarded by a training provider or educational institution based on completion of coursework. A certificate may be issued based completion of educational requirements and/or some type of assessment that the content (knowledge or skills) has been learned. A certificate is often based on a narrow scope of specialized knowledge or skills. It is awarded for life (like a degree); although some certificates may indicate a term of validity. Certificates cannot be taken away from the individual for disciplinary reasons. Certificates of attendance or participation are not in scope for this work.

**Certification:** A credential awarded by a certification body based on an individual demonstrating through a standardized examination process that they have acquired the designated validated knowledge, skills and abilities. Certification is often voluntary but may be mandatory when tied to state licensure. The identified competencies must be derived from a formal process often called a job analysis. The examinations can be written, oral, or performance based, but must meet psychometric rigor to demonstrate the examinations are fair, valid and reliable. Certification is a time-limited credential that is renewed through a re-certification process. A certification can be taken away from the individual for ethical violations or incompetence.

This request for clearance is for focus groups to solicit clarification from respondents about the language and terminology they use to talk about certifications and other properties of certification such as time-limits, assessment, provider, and industry recognition.

## **Design of Focus Groups**

We will conduct 3 focus groups in a professional focus group facility in Bethesda, Maryland, during evening and lunch hours. The facilities have an observation room. A professional focus group moderator will conduct the groups using a pre-designated focus group script (attached). The script has been designed in collaboration with the item development working group.

The objectives of the focus group research are to:

1. identify language and terminology used by certification holders when talking about their certifications;
2. determine properties of certifications that distinguish them from certificates and other types of similar qualifications;
3. identify key aspects of certifications that are recognized as indicators of quality; and,
4. find commonalities and differences in language and descriptions used across different certifications and among people with different qualifications (e.g. certificates, licenses).

*Target population.* To adequately test the items, it is necessary to recruit participants who can represent the major variations of experience in the target population. We want to hear from participants who have certifications, as well as respondents who have other types of qualifications (e.g. certificates) to identify appropriate language recognizable to people with similar, but different qualifications. To address this objective, we will recruit adults whose educational attainment is at least a high school diploma or GED but who do not have a bachelor's degree or higher. Further, we will target certification holders in the following industries – IT, Health, Construction, and Business, which represent four of the four groups of people with industry-recognized certifications.

Our target age range is adults ages 21-40.

We expect to conduct a total of 30 interviews in 3 groups of 10. Two groups will be certification holders in the 4 specified industries (IT, Health, Construction, and Business). The 3<sup>rd</sup> group will be adults with some other similar qualification or interest in obtaining one (e.g certificate, other certification, license, certificate from a college or trade school). The purpose of the 3<sup>rd</sup> group is to provide a comparison group for examining differences and similarities in language and other properties of these types of qualifications compared to industry-recognized certifications.

Table 1 shows the key groups. We will also endeavor to recruit respondents from different racial/ethnic backgrounds, ages, and genders. We will not specify quotas for these groups because we place greater emphasis on finding people with the specified certifications or other qualifications.

Per industry standard, we will recruit 12 respondents per group with the expectation that 8-10 respondents will show-up on the day of the focus group. However, we will include in the focus groups all recruited participants that show-up.

### **Estimated Response Burden**

We expect the focus groups to be approximately 90 minutes in length. This will result in 15 burden hours per group. Thus, the estimated total respondent burden for 3 groups is 45 hours.

Table 1. Focus groups by burden

<b>Group</b>	<b>Expected number of participants</b>	<b>Burden per participant (minutes)</b>	<b>Total burden (hours)</b>
Other qualifications	10	90	15
Certifications I	10	90	15
Certifications II	10	90	15

### **Estimated Cost Burden**

There is no direct cost to respondents.

### **Recruitment and payment to respondents**

Participants completing the focus-group will receive \$75. The recruitment and research firm, Shugoll Research, working in partnership with the American Institutes for Research, will recruit participants from prescreened research volunteers. Shugoll Research will recruit participants using their database of residents in the Washington, DC metro area. Information on file for database members includes education level, occupation/employment and other demographic characteristics such as age, gender and area of residence.

A recruitment script is attached.

### **Assurance of confidentiality**

Participation is voluntary and participants will be asked to sign a confidentiality pledge before interviews are conducted: Shugoll Research and the American Institutes for Research are conducting this study for the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) of the U.S. Department of Education. This study is authorized by law under the Education Sciences Reform Act (Public Law 107-279). Your participation is voluntary. Your responses are protected from disclosure by federal statute (P.L. 107-279, Title 1, Part E, Sec. 183). All responses that relate to or describe identifiable characteristics of individuals may be used only for statistical purposes and may not be disclosed, or used, in identifiable form for any other purpose, unless otherwise compelled by law.

No personally identifiable information will be maintained after the focus group analyses are completed.

## **Project Schedule**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Timeline</b>
Recruitment	December 2 (or upon approval by Dec. 3) to December 16, 2009
Focus groups 1 and 2	December 17 (at 6pm and 8pm)
Focus group 3	December 18 (at noon)