

International Fire Service Accreditation Congress

Certificate Assembly

Orientation



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ACCREDITATION

Accreditation is a status granted to an educational institution or program that has been found to meet or exceed standard criteria of educational quality. Accreditation is voluntarily sought by institutions and programs and is conferred by non-governmental bodies.

The accreditation process universally uses a common scope, whether international, national or regional. The process requires integral self-study of the institution or program, followed by an on-site visit from an evaluation team and finally, a review for approval by a central governing body, which in the IFSAC Certificate Assembly's case, is the Certificate Assembly Board of Governors.

Accreditation by IFSAC cannot guarantee the quality of the individual graduates or certified personnel within a program, but can give reasonable assurance of the content and quality of the testing program offered by the entity. Thus, the site visit and the site team members are critical not only in ensuring IFSAC compliance, but improving the overall quality of the program.

THE PRINCIPLE BENEFITS OF PEER REVIEW¹

Voluntary self-regulation is the cornerstone on which the structure of accreditation has been built in the United States. While other agencies, public and private, sometimes use the term "accreditation," historically, it has referred to a voluntary activity in which institutions and programs have agreed to be judged by their peers. The most effective form of regulation comes from voluntary organizations that structure programs of peer review.

Because peer review is the central tenet of voluntary accreditation, the qualifications and talents of the people who constitute the visiting site teams are critical to the credibility of the whole process. Even the most highly qualified team can be impeded in its work if the accrediting body has policies and procedures that confuse the expectations of the team. Therefore, all accrediting bodies must continually review the (1) expectations of site visitors; and (2) methods of finding, training, and evaluating those visitors.

STANDARDS, ACCREDITATION, AND CERTIFICATION DEFINED:

ESTABLISHING THE BASIS FOR DISCUSSION²

Clearly, standards, accreditation, and certification are related; but even without knowing the exact nature of the relationship, we know that fire service certifying organizations must deal with these three concepts. In discussing them, it seems vital to understand and agree on common definitions of these terms to ensure a common basis for discussion.

Accredit: To give official authorization to or approval of; to provide with credentials; to recognize an educational institution as maintaining standards that qualify its graduates for admission to higher or more specialized institutions or for professional practice.

- Certify:** To attest authoritatively, such as to attest as being true or as represented or as meeting a standard.
- Certificate:** A document containing a certified statement, especially as to the truth of something; specifically a document certifying that one has fulfilled the requirements of, and may practice in the field.
- Standard:** Something set up and established by authority as a rule for the measure of quantity, weight, extent, value, or quality.

Who Accredits?

In today's world, accreditation is a necessary condition for professionalism. Fire service organizations, as public agencies, are opened more frequently to public scrutiny and are held increasingly accountable for their actions. The value of accreditation is that it clearly establishes accountability for performance.

¹An accrediting body should be a separate and semi-independent organization whose business is the accreditation of certifying organizations and the maintenance of the accreditation records.

The accrediting organization must be perceived as being the best organization to do the accrediting. The certifying organizations that apply to be accredited as well as those that choose not to participate in the accreditation process must hold this perception. It is also beneficial if the individual firefighters have this perception.

Thus, the accrediting body should be perceived as being one whose reputation for fairness and objectivity is not in question. Neither would the accrediting body be viewed as being excessively politicized. Objectivity and fairness should be hallmarks. Only in this way can its credibility be maximized.

What should be the criteria for the accrediting body?

First, it must be representative of the group(s) being accredited. Those groups or organizations should play a major role in the determination of the board policies that will be followed. Such policies need to be reviewed from time to time. The constituent accredited member organizations should be involved in this process as well.

In selecting individuals for the accreditation board, qualifications should include such things as an understanding of the mission, fairness, budgeting, and record keeping. The accrediting process is equally important and individuals must be knowledgeable in these areas in order to be part of the accrediting body. Such individuals may be incidentally, but are not necessarily, content experts in the instructional subject matter.

¹ Adapted from the "Site Visitors in the Accreditation Process: A Guide to Issues and Practical Concerns," Council on Post-secondary Education, October, 1988

Who is accredited?

Fire service certifying entities that satisfy the criteria and comply with the policies established by the accrediting organization could be accredited. Note that content does not receive accreditation but is dealt with in the standard. A given certifying entity may clearly be accredited for delivering programs that comply with a set of standards but, in this case, it is the compliance – not the standards per se – that are being accredited.

Who benefits from accreditation?

The most obvious answer is members of the fire service. The impact on this group, being direct and rather immediate, is clearly the one that comes first to mind.

However, it must be kept clearly in mind that firefighters do not become accredited; they become certified. Certifying entities (which may or may not be the actual training organization) receive accreditation; individuals are certified for having completed an accredited certification program. Clearly an individual can derive satisfaction from the knowledge that one has completed a certification program that has been evaluated and deemed worthy by an objective and independent body.

There is another benefit in that the firefighter is made mobile by certification. With certification, lateral transfer of firefighters becomes a possibility between accredited agencies. However, it must be kept firmly in mind that the value of certification is only as strong as the accrediting body. Indeed, it could be argued that no certification at all is preferable to being “certified” by a program lacking accreditation.

A still stronger case can be made for the benefits that accrue to fire administrators, local governing bodies, local law enforcement officials, the news media, and local citizenry from having the members of a fire department participate in certification programs conducted under the auspices of an accredited certification entity.

A similar case can be made for the benefits to state policy-makers, the insurance industry, state law enforcement officials, the criminal justice system, researchers, and academicians. Certification by an accredited agency confirms various levels of job competency and the department’s competency as a whole. Certification will affect risk and liability determinations.

Without doubt, the greatest beneficiary of the accreditation process is the certifying entity itself. Accreditation leads to increased professionalism and that alone is desirable. Professional conduct in its operations by any organization leads that organization’s service community and those affiliated with it to hold the organization and its personnel in higher regard, so esteem rises.

All fire service certifying organizations should someday be accredited. You would not send your child to a school that wasn’t accredited, and you would not knowingly go to a hospital that wasn’t accredited. What, then, is the justification for sending a firefighter to be certified by an entity whose programs are not accredited?

IFSAC ORGANIZATION AND GOVERNING STRUCTURE

To fully appreciate the accreditation and site visit team issues; the site team member should have a thorough understanding of the IFSAC organization and governing structures. The following is a brief description of the makeup of IFSAC. For more detailed information, please refer to the by-laws and Constitution articles in the *IFSAC Certificate Assembly Handbook*.

IFSAC is a part of the College of Engineering, Architecture and Technology (CEAT). Also within CEAT are the School of Fire Protection and Safety Engineering Technology, the International Fire Service Training Association/Fire Protection Publications (IFSTA/FPP) and Fire Service Training (FST). IFSTA/FPP consists of the training materials validation process, publishing, and dissemination of IFSTA training manuals. FST is the fire service training organization within the state of Oklahoma.

The International Fire Service Accreditation Congress (IFSAC) is a peer-driven, self-governing system that accredits both fire service certification programs and higher education fire-related degree programs. The IFSAC system consists of five elements:

Certificate Assembly

The Certificate Assembly provides accreditation for those entities that certify the competency of and issue certificates to individuals who pass written and skills based examinations. These examinations are based on, and accreditation is available for all National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) professional qualification standards, and alternative standards approved by the Certificate Assembly. Accreditation is generally limited to one entity per state, province, territory, or branch of government.

Within five (5) years from the date of election to membership, each entity shall be accredited for at least one (1) level of certification. If at the completion of the five (5) year period, an entity does not have at least one (1) level accredited, an assessment shall be conducted, and the Certificate Assembly Board of Governors will evaluate the progress of that entity every six (6) months, recommending status as a voting member to the Certificate Assembly. All accredited entities must undergo reaccreditation every five (5) years from the time of the initial certificate accreditation. A site visit by qualified representatives of the Certificate Assembly will be part of the review process prior to Board approval of the entity's accreditation.

Organizations not currently involved in IFSAC can submit an IFSAC Application for Membership. Once the application is submitted, the entity applies for accreditation through an Application for Accreditation only when the entity determines that it is ready to be evaluated. Prior to submitting the Application for Accreditation, the entity is still a voting member of the Assembly. A site visit will be conducted once the Application and all necessary documents are received by IFSAC Administration. Site visits and reviews are conducted by peer users, and an appeal process is included. Teams for site visits will be chosen from qualified members from within the Certificate Assembly. The ultimate recommendations of the site team for or against accreditation will be a simple majority vote of the Board of Governors based on the recommendations of the site team. The accreditation process, including the progression from an

entity's application for membership, application for accreditation, through its consideration, review, visitation and decision, is detailed in the *IFSAC Certificate Assembly Handbook*.

The Certificate Assembly meets annually. The Assembly makes policy recommendations for direction of the system. It also forms the final step of the appeal process for accreditation issues. Each participating organization can send as many delegates as it wishes to meetings of the Assembly, but only voting entities have a designated vote in Assembly business. There is only one vote per voting entity.

The Board of Governors meets twice a year and responds to recommended actions of the Assembly. IFSAC Administration is involved on a daily, continuing basis, managing the business affairs of the system, providing administrative support, processing and reviewing applications, assisting in assembling site teams, issuing certificates, and maintaining an international registry.

System Benefits

- Certificate Assembly accredited entities base their certification programs on NFPA professional qualifications standards or alternative standards as approved by the Certificate Assembly, and on the *IFSAC Certificate Assembly Criteria for Accreditation*.
- Degree Assembly accredited entities base their programs on the IFSAC Degree Assembly Criteria for Accreditation.
- *Flexibility*: a built-in ability to meet local needs without compromising the system
- *User friendly*: a system based on the desire to serve the international fire service
- *Reliable*: Oklahoma State University has made a long-term commitment to IFSAC
- *Peer driven*: each voting entity has a voice in the operation of the system
- *Credible*: supported by the combined credibility of member entities and backed by the national reputation of OSU

The key element of the system is that virtually all rules and requirements of membership, participation, and operation are set by the Assembly members – the system users – through their own participation; and they make the system meet their own needs.

Degree Assembly

The Degree Assembly provides accreditation to fire-related degree programs. The mission of the Degree Assembly is to plan and administer a high quality, uniformly delivered accreditation system with an international scope for post-secondary degree programs currently operating worldwide. Degree Assembly efforts will provide a forum for interaction and standardization of these programs.

Board of Governors

The Certificate Assembly Board of Governors consists of 11 members and the Degree Assembly Board of Governors consists of 9 members. Each Board member serves a three-year term. Each Assembly elects the Board of Governors (BOG) that performs the following duties:

- Act upon all accreditation applications
- Ensure certification is performed on a valid, credible, nondiscriminatory, and timely basis
- Suggest guidelines and policies
- Clarify adopted policies

Council of Governors (COG)

The Council of Governors consists of 7 members, 3 from each Assembly, and 1 member from IFSAC Administration to serve as meeting facilitator. The COG serves as a liaison between the two Assemblies and works with both Boards of Governors to resolve issues that affect the Congress. Each member serves a three-year term.

IFSAC Administration

IFSAC Administration conducts the day-to-day routine business of the program and keeps appropriate records.

SITE VISIT TRAINING

The purpose of site visit training is twofold. First, it provides a common curriculum for training site team members. While the professional expertise and empowerment of team members are critical, it is imperative that they each receive a consistent background to ensure a common understanding of IFSAC requirements and expectations placed upon them. Secondly, site visit training provides information to entity members wishing to undergo a site visit. Some of the areas discussed include the responsibilities of each party involved in the visit including IFSAC Administration, host entity, site team leader, and site team members. The key to a successful site visit is preparation and mutual understanding of the accreditation process by everyone involved.

Routine training seminars, constant referral to the *IFSAC Certificate Assembly Handbook*, containing the *Criteria for Certificate Accreditation*, and continually updating the training curriculum, all serve to accomplish these goals.

While conducting training sessions for team members is imperative to the success of the accreditation process, it is also critical that team members remain current on issues regarding IFSAC. Each team member should have an *IFSAC Certificate Assembly Handbook* and review each of the following sections, especially before a visit:

- Site Visit Team Information
- Certificate Assembly Accreditation Procedures
- Criteria for Certificate Accreditation

- Applicable NFPA or alternative standards

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