

Competency Assessment

Programmatic Accreditation Practices

May 2019

Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors



This report summarizes the results of a survey to members of the Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors (ASPA) on accreditation practices related to the review and verification of competency assessment by higher education programs.

Contributors

ASPA members who responded to the survey accredit higher education programs for these professions and disciplines:

- Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine
- Allopathic Medicine
- Applied Engineering
- Applied Science
- Architecture
- Art and Design
- Art Therapy
- Athletic Training
- Audiology
- Business
- Chiropractic Medicine
- Computing
- Construction
- Clinical Laboratory Sciences
- Credibility Assessment
- Dentistry
- Dance
- Emergency Medical Services - Paramedic
- Engineering
- Engineering Technology
- English Language Training
- Exercise Sciences
- Forensic Science
- Funeral Service
- Genetic Counseling
- Health Education
- Industrial Technology
- Landscape Architecture
- Library and Information Studies
- Marriage and Family Therapy
- Medical Assisting
- Midwifery
- Music
- Naturopathic Medicine
- Nuclear Medicine Technology
- Nursing
- Nurse Anesthesia
- Nutrition and Dietetics
- Occupational Therapy
- Optometry
- Pharmacy
- Physical Therapy
- Physician Assistant
- Podiatric Medicine
- Public Health
- Public Policy, Affairs and Administration
- Psychology
- Rabbinical and Talmudic studies
- Respiratory Care
- Speech-Language Pathology
- Teaching
- Theatre
- Urban Planning
- Veterinary Medicine

Specialized and professional accreditors

Report at a glance

set national quality standards for programs in higher education so that students achieve the necessary competencies for safe and effective practice in a variety of professions. Experts in each profession contribute to the accreditation process and are critical to ensure that students achieve critical learning outcomes, so they have the practice skills to meet the needs of today's workforce. These subject matter experts include practitioners, employers, educators, members of professional associations, and other communities of interest.

To ensure that students who complete programs attain the competencies necessary for their chosen profession or field, programmatic accreditors review the assessment methodologies that programs have in place for student demonstration of competence.

This report compiles data obtained in a survey to members of the Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors (ASPA) on the practices that accreditors employ to verify the assessment activities of higher education programs in relation to student achievement of competencies. Fifty-five agencies responded.

Findings indicated accreditors have strict requirements that programs have a variety of assessment mechanisms in place that provide direct evidence of student attainment of competencies, but accreditors largely do not specify what those assessment methods should be.

ASPA is a member organization that provides a collaborative forum and a collective voice for USA-based accreditors engaged in quality assurance of specialized and professional higher education programs, schools and in some cases single purpose institutions.

ASPA member accreditors represent more than 100 different disciplines, from architecture to veterinary medicine and engineering to respiratory care.

Accreditors are generally not prescriptive with regards to assessment measures used by higher education programs. Programs look at successful course completion, work products, direct assessment (observation of actual student performance) in real practice settings, direct assessment in the classroom, student performance in simulations, portfolios, and success on licensure/certification examinations. Accreditors of programs for licensed/certified professions commonly require programs to use the licensure/certification examination pass rate as one form of program assessment.

Accreditors review a variety of evidence when verifying competency assessment.

Respondents noted reviewing samples of competencies mapped to courses, evidence of course completion, course examinations, student projects, student portfolios, theses, comprehensive exams and experiential placement reports.

Overall, it is apparent that specialized and professional accreditors are ensuring that the higher education programs they accredit have assessment mechanisms in place to ensure that students are prepared for safe and effective practice in their chosen profession or field of study.

Introduction

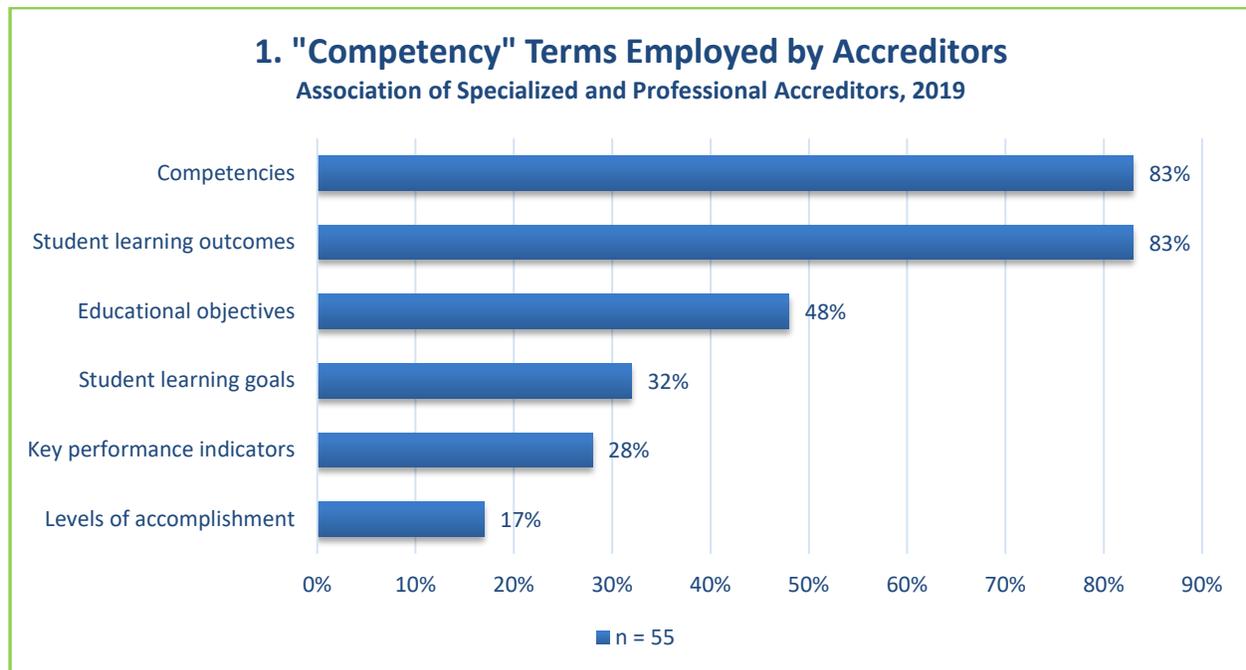
Specialized¹ and professional accreditors operate nationally and set educational quality standards for programs in various professions. Accreditation standards and processes are developed with input from expert stakeholders in the profession, including practitioners, employers and industry representatives, educators, professional associations, and other communities of interest. Programmatic accreditors focus on educational standards that protect the public interest by ensuring that students who complete programs are safe and competent practitioners in their chosen professions or fields of study.

During the early months of 2019, the Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors (ASPA) surveyed its members to determine how accreditors assess/review/verify the competency assessment performed by higher education programs to ensure that students have the appropriate skills for employment or achieve learning outcomes based on the program mission.

Competency Terminology

The term “competency”² may be used differently among the various professions and respective accreditors, or the term may not be used at all.

Figure 1 provides the percentage of accreditors using various terms for competency or student learning outcomes.



¹ The terms “specialized,” “professional” and “programmatic” are used synonymously in this report.

² ASPA defines competencies as the knowledge, skills, and abilities/attitudes necessary for safe and effective practice. These include profession-specific competencies, as well as critical thinking skills and the ability to grow, to adapt, and to create knowledge that is essential for the evolution of professional practice in response to a changing environment.

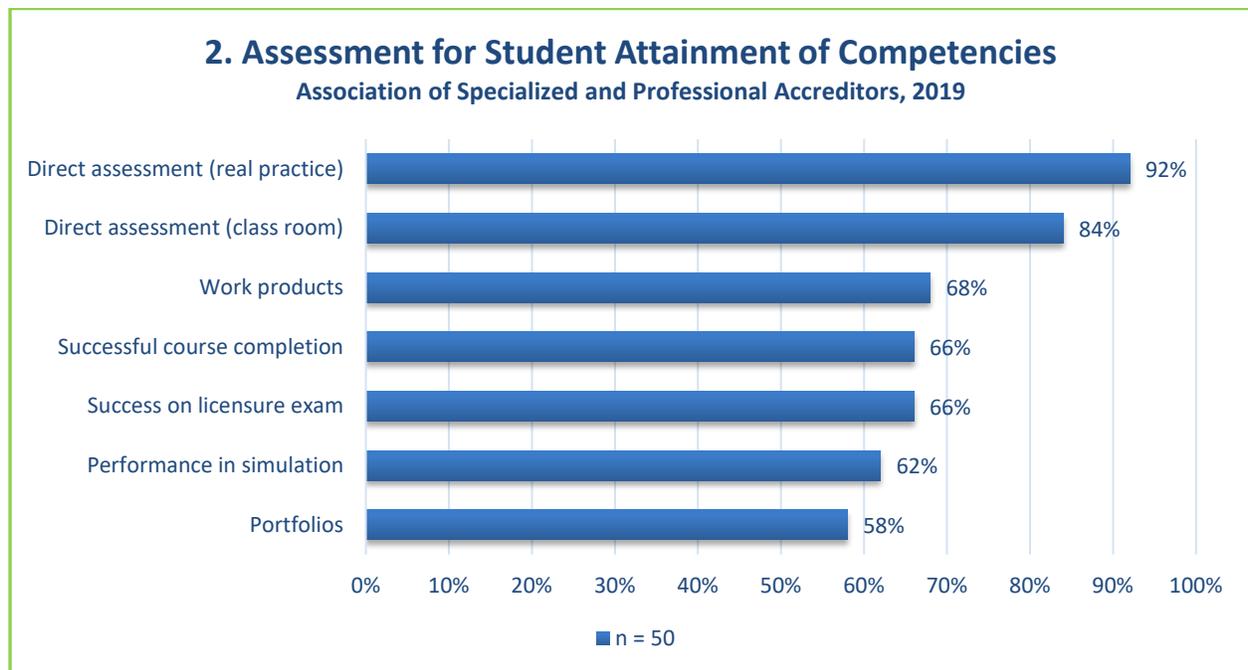
Additionally, several accreditors indicated other terms used in relation to student achievement of competencies, including assurance of learning, educational outcomes, development of expertise, acquisition of subject matter knowledge, cognitive objectives, student performance criteria, and benchmarks. This variety in terminology speaks to the diversity among professions.

Competencies are typically established by the accreditor in collaboration with stakeholders in the profession: practitioners, employers and industry, educators, and professional associations. In some instances, state regulators or professional certifying bodies may lead in establishing a profession’s competencies. Dependent on the profession, accreditors run the gamut on the level of prescription when identifying competencies in accreditation requirements, varying from complete accreditor control to a fair amount of flexibility allowed, permitting educational programs to determine competencies in accordance with their mission.

Assessment Practices

Accreditors tend to allow programs to determine the assessment methods they use. In all cases programs must demonstrate that the assessment methods are valid and provide evidence of achievement of student learning objectives. Most survey respondents indicated that programs must use a variety of assessment measures.

Figure 2 demonstrates the various types of assessment employed by programs.



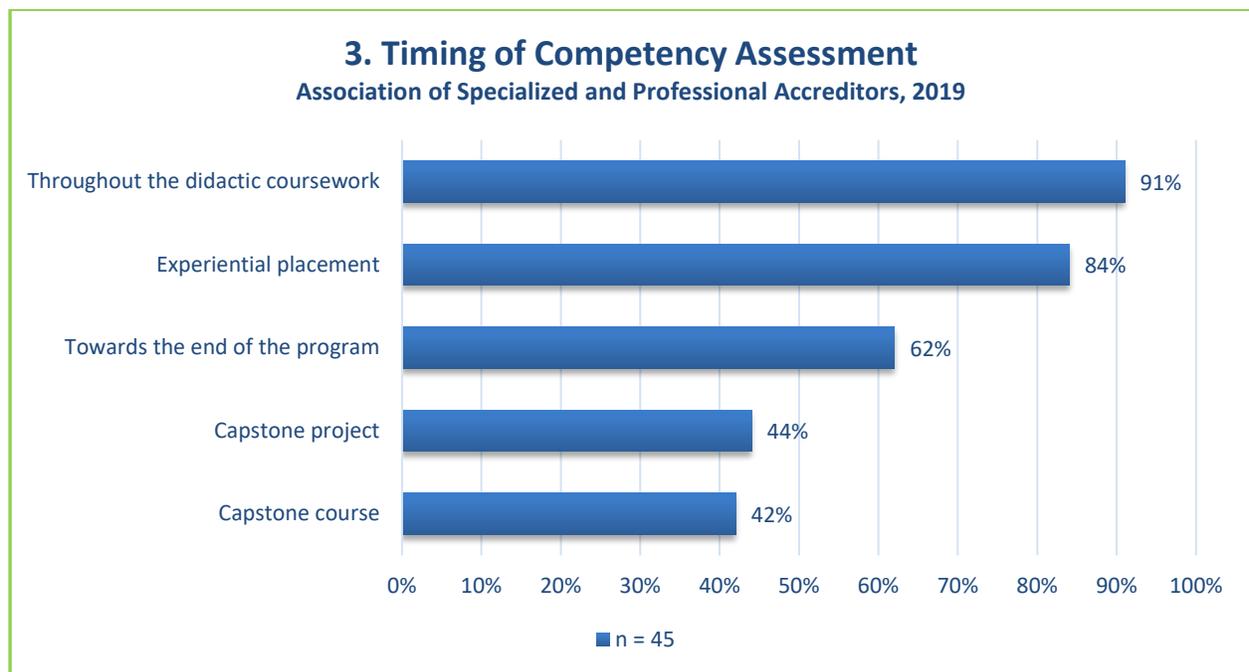
There is a notable exception to the level of flexibility for higher education programs in licensed professions. Several accreditors require such programs to use the licensure/certification examination pass rate as an assessment measure. Licensure and certification requirements vary among professions

and states. In some professions there may be a single licensure (or certification) examination for all jurisdictions in the USA. In other professions, some states may require licensure, while others do not. In cases where licensure or certification is voluntary, there may be employer preferences for hiring practitioners who have undergone the licensure or certification process.

When Competency Assessment Occurs

Most respondents indicated that competency assessment occurs throughout the professional curriculum.

Figure 3 indicates when competency assessment may occur during the educational program.

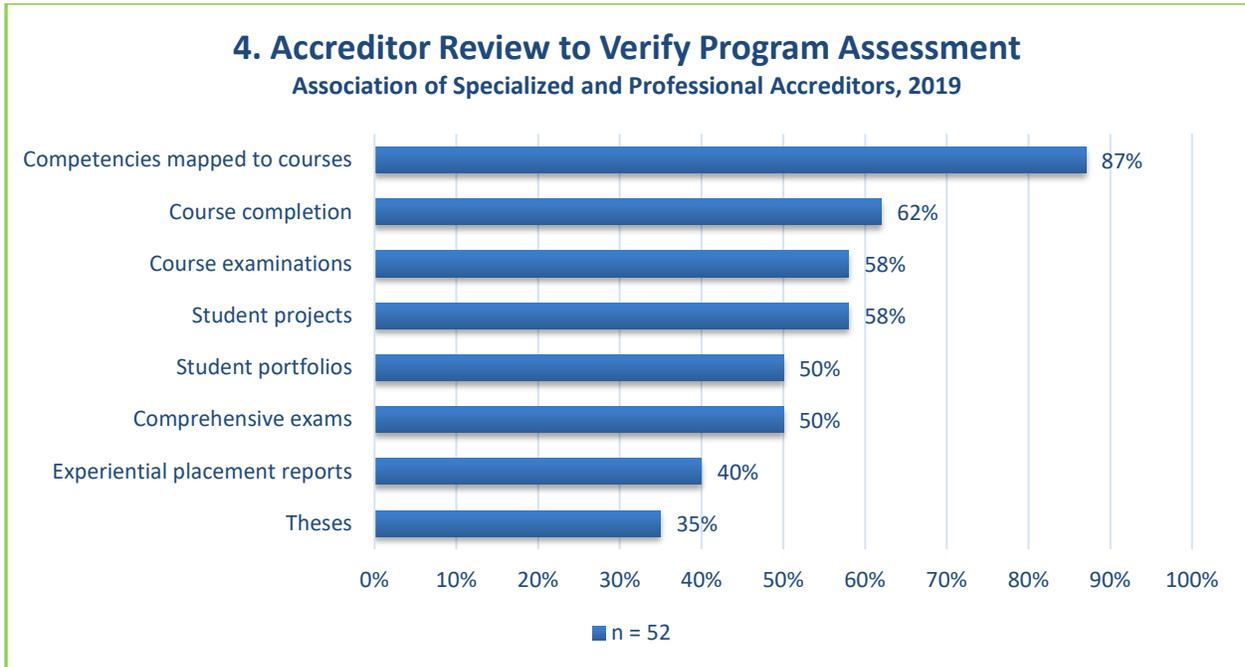


Approximately 50% of accreditors also indicated that competency assessment occurs at other junctures: towards the end of the program, during experiential placements, and/or during capstone courses or projects.

Accreditor Review of Programs

As indicated previously, accreditors are generally not prescriptive for the specific modes of assessment to demonstrate that students have attained competencies. Institutional/program autonomy is respected, and assessment methods will depend on the individual program's approach and the nature of the profession.

Figure 4 gives an indication of the various items that accreditors review when verifying the assessment performed by programs.



Other assessment methods examined include direct assessment of students by accreditation site visitors, certification exam results, and observation or practical examination at experiential sites.

Conclusion

The business of specialized and professional accreditors is to set standards for higher education programs so that students completing programs are prepared to safely and effectively practice in their chosen profession. Stakeholders can be assured that as part of the accreditation review process, specialized and professional accreditors ensure that programs in higher education employ a variety of means to assess that students have attained the necessary competencies.