



Pursuing Quality with IACET's Randy Bowman

Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 423

Randy Bowman: [00:00:00] Whether you pursue accreditation or not, pursue the quality.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:08] I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:09] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:17] In a crowded and competitive market, high quality, signaled by accreditation, can help a learning business stand out. And that's why we wanted to talk with Randy Bowman, president and CEO of IACET. The International Accreditors for Continuing Education and Training (or IACET for short) is a nonprofit standards development and accrediting body in the continuing education and training space. Randy brings to his role as CEO at IACET deep technical expertise, a focus on transformative leadership, and a commitment to human-centered design, and he works to ensure education and technology serve as pathways to human potential and societal progress. In episode 423, Randy talks with Celisa about what IACET does to support providers of learning, the development and maintenance of important standards like the Continuing Education Unit (or CEU), the benefits of accreditation, and the surprising fact that two-thirds of organizations undergoing IACET's accreditation process don't offer CEUs—they embark on the process for the other value it can bring. Celisa and Randy spoke in late June 2024.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:37] Tell us about IACET, what it does in general, and then maybe a sketch of what it offers in terms of learning opportunities.

Randy Bowman: [00:01:46] Sure. IACET basically has three pillars of work that it does. The first is, as a standards-developing organization, we have developed and maintained the standard for continuing education and training. And then the second pillar is related to that, in that we accredit training organizations who have adopted that standard and provide that third-party verification that all of their operations, all of their systems, and their learning program as a whole conform to the standard that we've already created. And then, of course, we do offer, as a

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third pillar, training to organizations who wish to become accredited on how to become accredited. It's pretty easy. But we also have some great training opportunities just for organizations who want to improve their learning programs and make sure that those are aligned to the standard. Even if they're not necessarily seeking accreditation, they still want to follow the best practices and want to learn more about the best ways to adhere to that standard.

Celisa Steele: [00:03:08] I know that one of the places I would love for us to dig in a little bit is around standards development, and you mentioned that standard for continuing education and training. So tell us a little bit more about that standard—why it exists and anything else you'd like for listeners to know about that standard.

Randy Bowman: [00:03:26] Sure. Probably most of your listeners are very familiar with the term CEU, the Continuing Education Unit. That particular measure for continuing education training was developed by the Council on Continuing Education in 1968 as a committee in the Department of Education. The U.S. Department of Education commissioned the committee. They spent two years researching a way to measure non-credit training activity, and, out of that work, they published the concept of the Continuing Education Unit, which has been in the public domain ever since. As you can imagine, that group of people were very passionate about continuing education, and they wanted to make sure that that CEU definition was maintained.

Randy Bowman: [00:04:19] So they established an association that eventually became IACET, and we've been maintaining that standard ever since. The ANSI-IACET standard for continuing education and training looks at the whole life cycle of an organization and the whole life cycle of instructional design and development and measures that against research-backed best practices to ensure that, when a learner engages with a training provider, they're getting a high-quality learning experience, that what the training provider says the learning event will deliver—what the outcome of the learning event is supposed to be—the standard makes sure that that actually happens, and that you get what you expect.

Celisa Steele: [00:05:14] You mentioned, in describing the history—thank you for that—you mentioned maintaining it. I don't know if there are any interesting shifts. What goes into maintaining and keeping an eye on the standard?

Randy Bowman: [00:05:26] Every five years we do re-review the standard and see if it's still meeting needs and then make adjustments as needed. Some good examples of some recent adjustments that we're in the process of making right now. In its 50-year history, the CEU has basically been defined as ten hours of learning activity equals one CEU, and you could round to

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the nearest 10th. Basically, anything more than half an hour of learning time could earn a 10th of a CEU because that half rounded up is 0.1. Well, as we all know, microlearning is taking the world by storm right now, and there is lots of research that shows three- and six-minute learning opportunities/learning events are valuable. How do you measure that to a CEU when you can only go to the 10th? That means you have to stack all them or put them together in a bundle, which then gets away from the whole idea of microlearning. So one of the things we have kicked around and that we're going to be introducing in our next publication of the standard is allowing for the rounding to the hundredths. That will now allow six-minute learning events to earn a CEU. So that's just one.

Celisa Steele: [00:06:55] Yes, I love that example because it is clearly where the standard, you're trying to keep pace with what's actually happening in the learning world—how people are learning. I like that a lot.

Randy Bowman: [00:07:05] Right. You can't just rest on the legacy of it. You have to constantly be innovating.

Celisa Steele: [00:07:10] I think in what you've already shared you've begun to get into this a little bit, but let's speak specifically and directly about major benefits of accreditation. In other words, what's the value of accreditation?

Randy Bowman: [00:07:27] There are several. Some of them are more tangible than others. Probably the most tangible one that your audience may be aware of is some regulatory and licensing boards either require or accept IACET CEUs earned by learners for that learner to maintain their license. We have a few instances of that. About 50 percent of the engineering boards in the United States accept IACET CEUs for engineers to maintain their engineering license. We have some in the early childcare industry, in secondary education, in teachers' licensing, construction safety and training. There are some areas where it's regulatory, required. Being accredited allows you to give learners who are in those fields CEUs that they can use to maintain their license. That's the tangible value.

Randy Bowman: [00:08:31] Some of the less tangible values.... By the way, only about a third of the people who seek accreditation are actually giving out CEUs. About two-thirds don't. They don't give CEUs. It's not important to them. They find value in these next set of things we're going to talk about, such as benchmarking. Since the standard is the standard, it's that, if you become accredited, you can say, "I meet this standard" and, in some cases, "I exceed this standard" because it is just a minimum standard—the minimum quality needed to do a good

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learning event. So there are ways to go above it, but it gives you that benchmark that, “Yes, we are doing the right things. I can tell my boss I’m doing the right things. I can tell my learners I’m doing the right things.” Scalability and succession planning are tied to this.

Randy Bowman: [00:09:28] One of the biggest benefits we hear from our accredited providers is it’s not necessarily the accreditation that is the most valuable thing; it is the journey to accreditation. It’s not the destination; it’s the journey. So, as they’re going through trying to become accredited, they’re really having to do a lot of internal evaluation, and they’re finding their own gaps, and so they’re updating their documentation. In some cases, they’re actually documenting work. We find that so many of the training providers are out there doing the right things. They know how to give high-quality learning events, but they may not have documented what they’re doing, especially in some of the smaller training providers. It’s all in Bob’s head. So, as Bob goes through this process, it has to come out of his head and onto paper.

Randy Bowman: [00:10:23] We know when you write things down, you have to be more concrete; you have to be more specific. And suddenly those little assumptions that people are making are revealed—those things that “Oh, everybody knows how” are revealed. And so the organization has to take care of that, and then they end up with an operations manual that they probably haven’t had. Now they’re geared for scalability and succession planning. Hey, I need to onboard three instructional designers right now. Well, I bring them on board, and I give them my operations manual that I had to develop through accreditation, and then they know exactly how we want things done. I can be assured that, if they follow those directions that we’ve given them, they will get the same output as if I had done it myself as Bob. If someone needs to leave a position vacant—maybe promoted—it’s easy now to backfill because all of that information is out of Jane’s head, and her successor can pick up right where she left off because it’s written down in a location, and the directions are there.

Celisa Steele: [00:11:44] I love that emphasis on succession planning, on consistency. You mentioned scalability, then, that can come from having that down. I found it fascinating that only about a third of the folks that go after accreditation care about the accreditation. It’s more about the process for the two-thirds, the majority. That’s very interesting.

Jeff Cobb: [00:12:08] At Tagoras, we partner with professional and trade associations, continuing education units, training firms, and other learning businesses to help them understand market realities and potential, to connect better with existing customers and find new ones, and to make smart investment decisions around product development and portfolio management.

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Celisa Steele: [00:12:44] I do want to take advantage of having you here to ask some advice on behalf of folks who might be listening, and I'm thinking of at least two groups. The first group is learning businesses that haven't yet gone down that accreditation path. What advice would you offer them in helping them assess whether this makes sense for them to even pursue or to engage with?

Randy Bowman: [00:13:12] First and foremost, I would say understand your learners' needs. There are hundreds of accreditations out there, hundreds of accreditation bodies. Like I said, depending on what regulatory industry you're in or who your regulators are or who your licensing board is, your learners may be looking not just for CEUs but for CMEs, CEs, or a plethora of other abbreviations. And so find out what your learners need continuing education for to maintain their own licenses and their credentials within their industry, and then seek accreditation from the correct body in your area.

Randy Bowman: [00:13:55] It is a daunting landscape out there, especially if you cross multiple jurisdictions and multiple industries. You may find that you need several accreditations from different bodies to fulfill all your learners' needs. So, first and foremost, check with your learners. What do they need? And then do the research to figure out which accrediting body is the right one for them. As a shameless plug, our accreditation, though, offers a great foundation because we are content-agnostic; we're not industry-specific, and we focus on that framework of designing and developing quality education, quality training. Usually if you have the IACET accreditation, you will find that you have everything you need as you pursue the other accreditations because you've done all the heavy lifting for this one.

Celisa Steele: [00:14:54] Before I ask your advice for the second group, which I'm going to do here in just a second, could you perhaps sketch for us what it looks like to go down this path? So somebody decided, "Okay, yes, this makes sense. I do want to start here, and I'm going to approach IACET." What does it look like, then, to go through that accreditation process?

Randy Bowman: [00:15:13] First, I would say you need to get the standard—and this will be good for whatever accreditation you're looking for. Find out what the requirements are, and get the standard. We happen to have a nice tool for ours called the Accreditation Readiness Calculator. It's complimentary. We give it out all the time. But take that, and it walks you through and says, "Do you have a policy on non-discrimination? Do you have a process for

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ensuring that your learner support systems do X, Y, and Z? Do you do this? Do you do that?" In our case, it's about 60 questions that we ask that are just yes/no, and all you're saying is, "Do I have this or not?" It allows you to do a mini gap analysis to see what do I have? What don't I have? What do I have in my head, but I've never written down?

Randy Bowman: [00:16:08] And so that begins your process of knowing, "How ready am I?" It's a self-evaluation that you just do. A "self-study" is a term you'll hear in the accreditation world a lot. You need to go do a self-study, and, basically, they mean do a gap analysis. Then you have a map. Once you've done the gap analysis, you then have a map of what you need to do to align to the standard. Anything that's a no, well, you know you need to make some organizational changes. Maybe anything that is a yes but not quite there is something you need to review and take those documents one at a time and update them. I generally advise people, if this is something you want to do, make sure you're intentional about it. Accreditation has a tendency....

Randy Bowman: [00:17:01] Generally, it's not someone's primary job, and it's one of those things that falls into what I would say is important but not urgent. And so you really need to be intentional and block out two hours a week that this is going to be my accreditation time, where I'm going to devote my time to either creating a new policy, creating a new process, updating a policy, updating a process to meet that standard. And, if you just sit down with your gap analysis at the beginning and go, okay, I'm going to do this one first, second, third, fourth, you put those on your calendar—intentionally blocking out that time—you now have a nice roadmap that will lead you to be successful in making the changes necessary to align with whatever standard you're looking at.

Celisa Steele: [00:17:52] Someone makes use of the calculator that you have. They do what you've just suggested around blocking out the time to fill in those gaps. Then they filled in those gaps. What happens next?

Randy Bowman: [00:18:03] Then you'll have to actually apply to whatever organization, and that will vary depending on how it is. You'll apply, and there will be an application, and the application is generally going to ask for you to provide documentation that you meet those different standards. In our case, we ask for policies, processes, and evidence. We want to see that you have certain policies in place. So, in our system, you'd upload those policies, and then we're going to say, "Show us evidence that you communicate these policies to the appropriate stakeholders," whether it's learners, employees, contractors.

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Randy Bowman: [00:18:47] You'll show us where you have the policy, on your Web site or in your handbook, so that you communicate that—that's the policy and the evidence. And we're going to ask for those processes. And once you submit all that documentation, it will be assigned to some peer reviewers, what we call "commissioners." These are industry experts who know continuing education and training very well, and they will take a look at your policies and your processes and determine, make an evaluation, an assessment: "Does this meet the standard?" And then they're going to look at your evidence to make sure you're following and doing what it is you said you do in your process.

Randy Bowman: [00:19:30] After that, there's usually some kind of interview that the commissioners are going to have with the applicants. We've done the desk audit; now we just want to get a feeling about the people who are running the program because, at the end of the day, it's people that make things happen, not documents. So they want to get a feel for these people. Have they truly incorporated these policies in their processes, into the fabric of their organization? And you can tell that when you talk to somebody. You can tell if they actually have taken these policies and these processes, and it's something they use every day, and it's something they're following. And so the interview reveals those gaps. After that, you're accredited.

Celisa Steele: [00:20:26] The other group that I wanted to ask your advice on behalf of has to do with organizations that are already doing something with accreditation. Do you have suggestions or recommendations for how they can make sure that they and their learners are getting the most value out of that accreditation?

Randy Bowman: [00:20:49] If you're already accredited and you want to make sure your learners are getting the most, I would say you've probably already done your homework. And, if there are any industries that you're specific in, any jurisdictions that you're specific in that maybe don't require accreditation as part of their continuing education licensing program, I would say one of the best ways to get value out of your accreditation is to be an advocate to those industries and those jurisdictions to start accepting CEUs or accepting accredited training, and asking those industries to hold themselves to a standard. The truth is, you're the biggest advocate of that. When we approach a regulatory body, we have an agenda, and rightly so. They're aware of that; they're less likely to listen to us. But, if you, as their constituent, as somebody in their state and in their industry, are advocating for it, they're more likely to be receptive. That's, I think, one of the best ways that you can add value, find a way to add value to your accreditation for your learners.

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Celisa Steele: [00:22:03] I like that idea a lot, of being the advocate for the whole idea of accreditation and trying to spread that as broadly as possible. I appreciate that viewpoint. IACET has been around for a while. You said earlier that the CEU has been around since 1968, I think. And so, I'm curious. If you look back on IACET's history, are there key events or shifts that have happened in the organization's existence or perhaps in accreditation more broadly or generally? I realize that's probably a really big question—sorry about that.

Randy Bowman: [00:22:37] Yes, when we first were established, we were called the Council for Continuing Education. In the 1990s, we had our first what I would call big change, and we changed the name to IACET, for International Association for Continuing Education and Training, to bring in that idea that the standard framework is international; the accreditation is international. It's not something just for U.S.-based training providers. In the early 2000s, we ourselves decided it was time to become accredited, and so we reached out and became ANSI-accredited, the American National Standards Institute. We followed their standards development process to become a standards-development organization and an accredited standards-development organization.

Randy Bowman: [00:23:31] That's really great because it means that we completely understand people going through the accreditation process because we have to do it too. We know what it's like to answer to someone, but, if nothing else, it was a huge transition, in that it gave our standard a little bit more authenticity because the process we use follows the process that ANSI requires. So we've been ANSI-accredited since 2007. Continuing to do that. And then probably the next biggest change was around 2018, when IACET moved from being a volunteer-managed association with an association management system and really turned to more of a staff-driven association management model. That has allowed us in these past five or six years since then to expand our brand and expand our reach and our impact. When you have dedicated staff working every day for just this mission, it makes a difference.

Celisa Steele: [00:24:45] I love that you, as an organization, decided to pursue the ANSI accreditation. That seems like a wonderful example of walking the walk in solidarity with those you serve. You can speak to the same value that they can of the overall process and what goes into that. So that was a little bit of a history, looking back. But now, if we look ahead, when you think about the future of accreditation, what comes to mind? What interests you? Are there trends or anything on the horizon that you tend to think about?

Randy Bowman: [00:25:20] I do, actually. I would say, especially in the higher education and academic fields, we're starting to see some regulatory backlash to accreditation. If you followed

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any of the news, you'll see that there are certain states that have said that, hey, we don't like where our universities are being accredited, and we want them to change accrediting bodies every 10 years. I'm seeing some backlash against that, and I think that's going to trickle down. But I think a lot of that has to do with.... Historically, accrediting bodies have been very exclusive. They build walls. And, to a certain degree, you have to. An accreditation is an obstacle. There is a gatekeeping piece to accreditation. But, instead of building gates, I think accreditors have been building walls. If you're going through accreditation and you're not meeting the standard, all they say is "Doesn't meet standard." And, if you ask a question, as you're going through accreditation, you're looked at in almost disdain, that, "Well, how can you not know this?"

Randy Bowman: [00:26:35] We're doing things differently here at IACET. We want to build ladders and platforms to get people up over those walls. We want to teach them how to bring them up to that standard. I think you're going to see that become a trend among accrediting bodies. We're coming up with a group of people who don't like bureaucratic administrative nonsense. They want to get to the meat of whatever it is we're doing, and they want to get to the meat of it fast. And I think accrediting bodies who continue to operate in this ivory tower-type mentality aren't going to be meeting the needs of their training providers, and they're going to see accreditation decrease in importance and in value. And so accrediting bodies that instead become more customer-centric, more learner-centric, and that are there to offer ladders and ropes and assistance and guide step-by-step through the journey are going to change the accreditation landscape in a positive way.

Celisa Steele: [00:27:44] I certainly hope you're right. That sounds like a much better future to be headed towards rather than one where you get your hand slapped if you don't manage to follow the procedures the first time.

Randy Bowman: [00:27:55] Yes, I just don't understand it. To me, if we're trying to raise the standard and the quality of continuing education and training, why are you going to slap people down? That doesn't make any sense to me. No. Instead of saying, "Oh, you're not good enough," let's say, "Here's where there are some gaps, and here are the tools and resources you need to bridge those gaps so that you can be the kind of training organization that you want to be." People want to be the best. They want to do good, quality work. They want to deliver a great product. And, if they're not, let's help them get there.

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Celisa Steele: [00:28:36] Given that this is the Leading Learning Podcast, one of the things we always like to ask guests is about their own approach to lifelong learning. So, Randy, what are your sources, habits, or practices in terms of your own lifelong learning?

Randy Bowman: [00:28:50] I'm a reader. I love to read. I am always on the lookout for new books. And usually, how I find those is I'll be on something like LinkedIn, and some posts or something will capture me. I'll go, "Wow, that guy has a real insightful thought," and, next thing I know, he's got that either from a book or a book he's written or she's written or something else. And then I go, "I've got to have the whole book. I like the snippet." And so my Amazon Wish List is always much, much larger than my Amazon budget will allow. That's where I get most of my stuff from—seeing those and then buying the book and devouring it.

Celisa Steele: [00:29:32] As we begin to wrap up, any final thoughts, anything else you would like for listeners to be sure to walk away from our conversation knowing or having thought about?

Randy Bowman: [00:29:43] I would just say to our listeners pursue excellence. Pursue quality. Whether you get accredited or not—which is going to sound like, "Hey, aren't you supposed to sell accreditation?" But here's the thing. Whether you pursue accreditation or not, pursue the quality. Yes, the third-party verification of accreditation that, yes, you match that, is valuable, and it's wonderful, but I would rather somebody come and get the standard and do that self-study on their program and move their program forward, move their training program forward and not get accreditation than to not do anything.

Jeff Cobb: [00:30:31] Randy Bowman is president and CEO of IACET. In the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode423, you'll find a link to the IACET Web site and to Randy's profile on LinkedIn.

Celisa Steele: [00:30:46] At leadinglearning.com/episode423, you'll also find options for subscribing to the podcast. We'd be grateful if you would subscribe if you haven't yet, as those subscriptions give us some insight into the impact of the podcast.

Jeff Cobb: [00:30:58] We'd also be grateful if you would rate us on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen, especially if you find the Leading Learning Podcast valuable. Those ratings and reviews help us show up when people search for content on leading a learning business.

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Celisa Steele: [00:31:11] And please help us grow the Leading Learning community. At leadinglearning.com/episode423, there are links to find us on LinkedIn, X, and Facebook.

Jeff Cobb: [00:31:21] Thanks again, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

[music for this episode by DanoSongs, www.danosongs.com]

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