What Has Biofeedback Certification Institute of America Been up to?

Fred Shaffer, PhD, BCIAC, and Judy Crawford

1Truman State University, Kirksville, MO; 2Biofeedback Certification Institute of America, Wheat Ridge, CO

Keywords: biofeedback, neurofeedback, certification, education

The Biofeedback Certification Institute of America (BCIA) board has actively involved our certificants in strategic planning designed to strengthen our advocacy for the issues that concern them, improve an already successful certification process, and identify initiatives that will add value and recognition to our credentials. This article details the exciting actions that we have taken to protect the welfare of biofeedback consumers, to provide credibility to biofeedback practitioners, and to advance the field of biofeedback.

The Biofeedback Certification Institute of America (BCIA) board has dedicated the past two years to advocacy for our certificants and the field, careful review and improvement of the certification process, and initiatives to add value and recognition to our credentials. This article summarizes our progress in areas as diverse as protecting the term biofeedback, simplifying our human anatomy/physiology requirement, refining our certification exams, simplifying our reading lists, providing online exams, reducing certificant expenses, strengthening ethics education, and helping certificants market their practice.

Biofeedback Definition
As many of you are aware, biofeedback is an unprotected term. Unscrupulous marketers who co-opt this term for devices that do not feed back physiological activity to the individual or aid their self-regulation threaten to confuse health care professionals and consumers. To address this issue, Association for Applied Psychotherapy and Biofeedback (AAPB), International Society for Neurofeedback and Research (ISNR), and BCIA adopted a definition of biofeedback on May 18, 2008:

Biofeedback is a process that enables an individual to learn how to change physiological activity for the purposes of improving health and performance. Precise instruments measure physiological activity such as brainwaves, heart function, breathing, muscle activity, and skin temperature. These instruments rapidly and accurately “feed back” information to the user. The presentation of this information—often in conjunction with changes in thinking, emotions, and behavior—supports desired physiological changes. Over time, these changes can endure without continued use of an instrument.

Please consider this definition and incorporate it into your Web site and printed materials. We need to help the community understand what is or is not biofeedback.

Human Anatomy/Physiology
In response to applicant concerns about finding appropriate and affordable courses that would fit within their busy work schedules, BCIA initiated a “Study on Your Own” option using Marieb and Hoehn’s Human Anatomy and Physiology (7th edition or later). After reading designated chapters that are most relevant to biofeedback practice, applicants must take and pass an online or physical multiple-choice exam to fulfill this requirement. This new option should make review of human anatomy/physiology more convenient and affordable.

Please don’t forget that you may continue to fulfill the anatomy/physiology requirement through the excellent online vendor courses listed at the BCIA Web site (http://www.bcia.org).

Exam Psychometrics
We have painstakingly evaluated and revised our certification exams. Several experts reviewed all of our certifi-
cation exams to ensure that the questions adequately represent key blueprint concepts, are sourced to our suggested reading list, and conform to the highest psychometric standards. We replaced outdated exam questions with new ones contributed by leaders in our field and validated by our certificants.

Although we have maintained our high standards, this revision process has improved applicant performance on our exams. More candidates than ever are passing with higher scores! Between 85% and 90% of our candidates pass on their first attempt. Spread the word—The old exams are dead. As one recent successful candidate advised, “Don’t put it off. Pick a date/location/time, and then set aside an appropriate amount of study time for you.”

Many candidates have recommended that applicants find a “study buddy” to help review for our didactic exams. Technologies like Skype allow you to collaborate with colleagues anywhere on the planet.

Streamlined Reading Lists
We greatly simplified our recommended reading lists when we updated our certification exams. The new reading lists are compact, accessible, inexpensive, and closely tied to actual exam items. They consist of current textbooks and articles recommended by our experienced educators. All of these articles may be downloaded for free. You can find a current reading list and access free articles on our Web site.

Online Exams
We launched online testing in 2009 for our certification and anatomy/physiology exams. Now, candidates can take these exams at a proctored computer site in their area in addition to paper-and-pencil exams at both local and regional sites. Online testing has allowed us to expand certification internationally and to provide local special exams at a significant cost savings.

No Increase in Fees in 2009
BCIA has not raised a single fee associated with the certification process in nearly 20 years. Additionally, we have not raised recertification fees in more than 5 years. We know that the recession has hit many of you hard. Despite our increased challenge of maintaining a balanced budget, your board unanimously voted to hold the line on all fees associated with our credentials for 2009.

Recertification
Many certificants have reported difficulties in finding good-quality continuing education (CE) that is accessible and affordable. Your board took several actions to resolve this concern. First, they lowered the CE requirement for Senior Fellows from 55 accredited hours to 30! Second, they approved an online CE option. They selected free magazine and journal articles from the AAPB and ISNR Web sites. You may read these articles and then pass a brief online exam for CE credit. We’ve provided a list of these articles on our Web site.

Ethics
In 2009, your board voted to implement an ethics education requirement that will also count for CE credit. Starting in 2010, all certificants will be required to document 3 hours of ethics coursework as part of their CE. This should not be a burden to anyone, because many certificants are required by their state board to take ethics course work to maintain their license. BCIA will continue to offer American Psychological Association-accredited ethics courses at future AAPB meetings.

New Logo
We worked with a graphic designer to make our logo more eye-catching and readable. You can now actually identify the letters inside the circle. We hope that all our certificants will use it on their Web sites and printed materials to more effectively promote their practice and credential. Please contact BCIA if you have not yet received your copy of this beautiful logo.

I’m Board Certified!
Yes, you are! BCIA is the most widely recognized board for certification in the field of biofeedback. We hope that you will do a good job in thoroughly explaining who you are as a professional, how you use biofeedback, and what your credential really means.

Job Board
We are really proud of this idea and we’d like to take credit for it, but it was really suggested by you—our certificants. Some of our certificants are employers, and have asked us to help reach out and find other BCIA-certified professionals to fill jobs in your area. We hope to see increased use of this area on our Web site as demand for your skills and credential increase.

Is It Too Late for Me to Earn Certification?
The board was surprised to learn how many of the experts in our field had never taken the time to complete the entry-level certification requirements. Did that mean these were not well-trained providers? No. It was quite the opposite.
BCIA launched Certification by Prior Experience (CPE) to address the needs of licensed professionals who have taken significant numbers of training courses to promote and enhance their skills and have surpassed entry-level competence.

Our review of the first group of candidates who completed the CPE process yielded some surprising results. Many professionals had taken more course work than we expected, could demonstrate that they had formally studied the human body and its systems, and had worked with a mentor to learn the application of clinical skills. Because most of our applicants exceeded our requirements, the board raised the bar to reflect the excellence of our applicant pool.

Now, CPE requires more than 100 hours of continuing education, more than 3,000 patient/client hours using biofeedback, proof of formal study of the function of the human body through various methods, and proof of a formal mentoring to learn the application of clinical biofeedback skills with patients/clients. Because biofeedback plays an increasingly important role in health care, especially in the treatment of traumatic injury in veterans, many well-respected clinicians have approached BCIA to gain their credentials through this program. These professionals value the opportunity to demonstrate their dedication to the field and want to help establish standards of education and training, and most important, expert care for their patients.

We hope you are all proud to display your logo and list yourself as part of an elite group of biofeedback professionals who are “more than qualified”—they are “BCIA certified”!

References