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A Call for Recognizing Equivalent Aquatic Training Certifications

Leland Yarger

The concept of “equivalency of certifications” as described in this article needs clarification. It should be recognized that most training agencies have unique views and philosophies about the training they offer that make their programs stand out. This article merely points out that from aquatic professional to aquatic professional, or from one state law to another state law, many categories of health or safety training are often considered equal to one another. In this article, I attempt to objectively describe the categories of health- and safety-certification listings and encourage readers to examine the content of the programs and decide for themselves.

As a result of a recent meeting with a national not-for-profit organization with many aquatics-related programs, I have reflected on my previous experiences with various training agencies and aquatic-program employers. My reflections, along with my conversations with other aquatic faculty and professionals around the country, provided the motivation for writing this article.

Two specific examples really emphasize the main premise for this article. A representative of a national training agency explained that the organization recognizes the American Heart Association, American Red Cross, or National Safety Council CPR and first-aid certifications as a prerequisite before students can take a certification class. When questioned about the certifications offered by the Emergency Care and Safety Institute (ECSI), also commonly referred to as the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons program, the response was that the organization did not accept the ECSI certifications. This was troubling to me because at the time that the training organization’s policy for approved certifications was established, the ECSI program was in fact the program used in the National Safety Council texts. Therefore, even though the training organization said it did not recognize the ECSI program, in fact it did but failed to recognize it.

A second example comes from another not-for-profit organization that conducts aquatic programs. The national leadership of this organization specified as policy that a single scuba certification program was recognized, although seven other very credible programs exist. I question the organization’s ethics because all seven scuba programs’ training requirements are very similar. In addition, the organization’s sole acceptable scuba agency is not available in all areas of the country.

These two examples serve to identify several of the potential problems related to limited interagency acceptance of health and safety certifications. Many aquatic

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employers find it most convenient to use a single agency's certification training for their staff, especially if the agency is the one with which the employer is most familiar or with whom the manager is also personally certified. Truly knowledgeable managerial personnel at aquatic facilities should recognize that accepting certifications from multiple equivalent agencies broadens their employee candidate pool. Other well-informed employers might cross-train or retrain new employees that hold other certifications so that all members of their staff "speak the same language." This technique is well advised from a risk-management standpoint.

In the following tables and paragraphs, I identify and describe training agencies for CPR and first aid, water safety, scuba, and aquatic operations and management to illustrate their equivalencies. I present this information as an educational service to my fellow aquatic professionals in an attempt to clarify how and in what cases agencies offer equivalent certifications. I believe that when aquatic professionals begin to realize how much the different agencies have in common in different categories of certification, it will promote a greater degree of understanding and, hopefully, a broader acceptance of different certifications by different facilities and employers.

CPR and First Aid

Table 1 identifies the leading training agencies that all comply with the 2005 emergency cardiovascular care guidelines or, in the case of first-responder certifications, the 1995 Department of Transportation standards.

It is important to note that CPR certifications typically are valid either 1 or 2 years before retraining and recertification are required. First-aid certifications are typically valid for 3 years before review, retraining, and recertification are needed. First-responder certifications generally contain first-aid content at the more advanced first responder or beginning emergency medical services professional level, which includes oxygen administration, maintenance of airways, and suctioning. Included in this category is CPR for the professional rescuer, which trains individuals to use automated external defibrillation (AED) units. This training reflects certifications lasting for 1–2 years for the CPR portion and 3 years for the first responder first-aid portion.

Table 1 CPR and First-Aid Equivalent Training Agencies

Certification level	Training Agency				
	AHA	ARC	ASHI	ECSI (AAOS)	NSC
Basic or lay responder, CPR and first aid	X	X	X	X	X
CPR for the professional rescuer or health care provider	X	X	X	X	X
First responder or emergency response		X	X	X	X

Note. AHA = American Heart Association; ARC = American Red Cross; ASHI = American Safety and Health Institute; ECSI (AAOS) = Emergency Care and Safety Institute (American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons); NSC = National Safety Council.

Water-Safety Certifications

Table 2 illustrates the two most recognized aquatic qualifications: lifeguard training and swimming instructor. All the organizations listed in Table 2 provide lifeguard-training certification, certification for swimming instructors, or both. Readers should realize that the USLA authorizes organizations to conduct training that complies with their guidelines, and therefore individual certifications are not issued by the USLA.

It should be understood that most lifeguard-training programs require certification for first aid, CPR for the professional rescuer, and AED to be earned before or concurrently with the lifeguard training. The length of time for which lifeguard credentials typically are valid ranges from 1 to 3 years, depending on the agency. Swimming-instructor credentials typically last for 1–2 years, depending on the agency. Recertification qualifications and procedures also vary from agency to agency.

Operations and Management

Table 3 illustrates the most commonly recognized programs available in the United States for certifying pool operators and providing pool-management certifications. Some state laws specifically identify the need for pool-operator certification, and other states have no regulation that certified operators are needed.

The typical length of time that pool-operation and -management certification is valid is 1–5 years. The dominant and most widely recognized aquatic-operation certification is the National Swimming Pool Foundation's pool-operator certification. The National Swimming Pool Foundation consistently trains more than 10,000 people in their certified-pool-operator course each year.

Scuba Diving

Table 4 identifies the most common introductory-level recreational scuba-diving training agencies in the United States. The World Recreational Scuba Training Council has guidelines for training standards for scuba, and all the agencies listed in Table 4 are members of the World Recreational Scuba Training Council in the United States.

Table 2 Water-Safety Certifications or Training Credentials

Certification	Training Agency					
	ARC	Ellis	NASCO	Starfish Aquatics	YMCA	USLA
Lifeguard training	X	X	X	X	X	X
Swimming instructor	X	X		X	X	

Note. ARC = American Red Cross; Ellis = Ellis and Associates; NASCO = National Aquatic Safety Company; USLA = United States Lifesaving Association.

Table 3 Aquatic-Operations and -Management Certifications

Certification level	Training Agency							
	American Red Cross	Aquatic Safety Research Group	Aquatic Partners	Aquatic Training Institute	National Recreation & Park Association	National Swimming Pool Foundation	Starfish Aquatics	YMCA
Pool operations		Practical pool management plus	Certified pool-water technician	Certified pool technician	Aquatic facility operator	Certified pool operator	Aquatech	Pool operator on location
Pool inspection						Certified pool inspector		
Aquatic management	Lifeguard management	Aquatic risk management	Certified aquatic administrator and certified pool manager					YMCA aquatic management

Table 4 Basic Scuba-Diving Training

Training agency	Member of the World Recreational Scuba Training Council
International Diving Educators Association	X
National Association of Underwater Instructors	X
Professional Association of Diving Instructors	X
Professional Diving Instructors Corporation	X
Scuba Diving International	X
Scuba Schools International	X
YMCA Scuba	X

Unlike most other aquatic certifications, scuba certifications are considered lifelong and do not have an expiration date or authorization. On the other hand, scuba divers are responsible for seeking continued training and must be accountable to their dive buddies and themselves in all situations. Common sense dictates that if any extended amount of time elapses between certification and regular scuba experiences, recertification should be sought for the diver's personal safety and that of his or her dive companions.

Conclusions

U.S. state laws dealing with various aquatic venues, such as bathing codes or facility-operation codes, normally specify required certifications and the equivalents to those certifications for aquatic personnel, although these codes vary widely across different states. Unfortunately, aquatic codes based in legislation might be decades behind the aquatic industry's practices in some states because of the length of time it takes for health agencies to get legislators to update codes. In my opinion, training agencies must promote the need for common training standards across training agencies because of the potential for litigation against any single agency. Of course, common standards and procedures themselves will assist in lifesaving efforts, to the degree that everyone understands the common standards and procedures. Employers should demand a list of equivalent training agencies such as I have provided in the tables in this article to help them justify the validity of the content used by their current certification agencies (see the Appendix for a master chart of agencies). The results should lead to a stronger aquatic industry, better informed employers and employees, and the ability to manage risk more effectively within and across facilities and programs.

Special Thanks

I would like to thank and recognize Dr. Stephen Langendorfer for his continued support and editorial assistance with this and many other articles. I am a lifeguard and aquatic instructor by trade; as such, writing is work for me. Dr. Langendorfer understands my raw material and has an elegant way of bringing my intentions to a concise point. I encourage other aquatic professionals who have trepidation about writing to contribute to this fine publication.

Web Sites for Reference

American Heart Association: www.americanheart.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=3011775
American Red Cross: www.redcross.org/services/hss/resources/
American Safety and Health Institute: www.ashinstitute.com/first_responder.htm
Aquatic Partners: www.aquaticpartners.com/manager.html
Aquatic Safety and Research Group: www.aquaticsafetygroup.com/armseries.html
Aquatic Training Institute: www.aquatictraininginstitute.com/pages/default.aspx
Emergency Care and Safety Institute: www.ecsinstitute.org/community/about_available_courses.cfm
Jeff Ellis Swimming: www.jellis.com/swimming-instruction.html
National Aquatic Safety Company: www.nascoaquatics.com/PICeBrochure.html
National Recreation & Park Association: nrpa.org/content/default.aspx?documentId=26
National Safety Council: www.nsc.org/train/ec/
National Swimming Pool Foundation: www.nspf.org/CPI.html
Starfish Aquatics Institute: <http://starfishaquatics.org/page.cfm?pageID=75>
United States Lifesaving Association: www.usla.org/Train%2BCert/
World Recreational Scuba Training Council: www.wrsc.com/agency.php?country=usa
YMCA of the USA: www.ymca.net/programs/programs_for_aquatics.html

Appendix: Certification Agency Master Table

Training agency	Certifications Offered				
	CPR	Lifeguard training	Swimming instructor	Operations and management	Scuba training
American Heart Association (AHA)	X				
American Red Cross (ARC)	X	X	X	X	
American Safety and Health Institute (ASHI)	X				
Aquatic Partners				X	
Aquatic Safety Research Group (ASRG)				X	
Aquatic Training Institute (ATI)				X	
Emergency Care and Safety Institute (ECSI/AAOS)	X				
Ellis and Associates		X	X		
International Diving Educators Association (IDEA)					X
National Association of Underwater Instructors (NAUI)					X
National Aquatic Safety Company (NASCO)		X			
National Recreation & Park Association (NRPA)				X	
National Safety Council (NSC)	X				
National Swimming Pool Foundation (NSPF)				X	
Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI)					X
Professional Diving Instructors Association (PDIA)					X
Scuba Schools International (SSI)					X
Starfish Aquatics Institute		X			
United States Lifesaving Association (USLA)		X			
Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA)		X	X	X	X