INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY CERTIFICATION: IS THIS YOUR MISSION?

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A few weeks ago, a prospective freshman and his parents sat down with me to learn more about our academic program. They had taken the campus tour offered by the Admissions Office and were visiting the departments in which the student was most likely to select a major. After I had finished my presentation on our program's curriculum, the qualifications of our faculty, and the success of our students in securing jobs, I paused to see if they had any questions. The parents immediately asked the student to show me his résumé. I was interested to see this, as most high school seniors don't have very much to put on a résumé. This student was a little different, although not unique, in that he had his own part-time computer consulting business. What his parents were most anxious for me to see, however, was that he was a certified Unix system engineer. The parents asked me if I thought their son was the kind of person who would be happy majoring in our program.

I replied that we have all kinds of students in our program. Some are very technically oriented, while others concentrate on developing their business or "soft" skills. I asked the student what he hoped to get out of his university education. "I want to be a Unix system administrator," was his reply. I responded, "Well, as your résumé shows, you don't have to get a university degree to do that."

This encounter, to me, dramatically illustrates the central issue raised by the debate over whether four-year colleges and universities ought to offer vendor-specific certifications in information technologies. The debate is not about whether we ought to offer certifications at all. We are already in that business. Any good accounting program is, among other things, a preparation for students who want to be certified public accountants. Nurses, lawyers and physicians are prepared for their certifications through university and college education. Our undergraduate degrees are a kind of certification: The bachelor of business administration certifies that a student has had training in basic business skills, while the bachelor of science testifies to a rudimentary scientific training, and the bachelor of arts represents a foundation in the liberal arts. Our more specialized programs, such as the education specialist or master of fine arts, certify even more highly focused training.

The debate is rather whether colleges and universities ought to be offering their students preparation for certifications in the technology of particular information systems vendors, such as the Certified Novell Engineer (CNE) or Microsoft Certified Systems Engineer (MSCE). The benefits touted for such certifications are that students are provided with widely recognized, marketable skills; that employers get new employees with a known set of capabilities; and that faculty and programs will become known for their expertise in these areas, thus attracting more students and employers for their graduates. The argument in favor of such certifications was ably made by Charlie Ray and Randy McCoy and by Chet Delaney in the last issue of the *Information Technology, Learning, and Performance Journal.*

These certifications are very important. They are important to the vendors who create them as ways to promote the widespread adoption of their products and technologies. They are important to employers who need this valuable expertise.

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They are important to the students who use these skills to get better jobs. They are also important to the institutions that provide the training, in both attracting and placing their students. Certainly this training should be widely available to students and professionals who want it.

My argument is that the best settings for these kinds of training programs are the vendors and their associated training firms, technical and vocational schools, and community colleges. These certification programs are properly understood as *workforce development training,* a critically important mission for these businesses and institutions. Workforce development training is not, however, the primary mission of most four-year colleges and universities. Our mission is, rather, to develop in students a wide variety of less specific abilities: critical thinking, analysis, appreciation of the arts and diverse cultures, foreign languages, the scientific method, and the history and politics of their own and other societies. In addition, we inculcate more detailed knowledge in one or more major fields of study, some quite technical. This process is a lengthy one, usually requiring four years or more to complete.

Should my prospective student come to my university for four or more years to become a certified Unix system engineer? Clearly not, as he had earned that certification before even completing high school. Rather, he should come to the university to develop all those other skills, and the maturity, that will equip him for lifelong success in a dynamic technical field in which a particular technology or vendor product may become useless overnight. Our Bachelor of Business Administration in Computer Information Systems (BBA in CIS) is a much more valuable certification than any of the programs Microsoft offers.

For those readers of *ITL&PJ* who are thinking of offering vendor-specific certification training, please ask yourselves, "Is this kind of workforce development training our mission?" If so, then do yourselves and your students a favor and get started. You will be offering a valuable and important service.

If this kind of training is not one of your program's major missions, then what benefits do you anticipate? Is a Microsoft or Novell certification more valuable than your bachelor's degree? If so, you need to begin the long and arduous process of upgrading your curriculum and increasing the visibility of, and respect for, your program among students and employers.

Vendor-specific information technology certifications are valuable and significant workforce development programs that should be widely offered by vocational and technical schools, community colleges and commercial training companies. They are not, however, consistent with the mission of most four-year colleges and universities.