CNE Versus CEU: The Confusing Language of Continuing Education Credit

Recently, I attended a national meeting, and it was fabulous! The speakers were great, the topics were timely, the comments were sufficiently outrageous to stimulate our thinking, and the breaks did not interrupt the meeting’s flow. So, what could have been better?

Actually, this meeting was only one example of numerous meetings that have the same issue. The meeting itself is always great, but understanding the continuing education credit piece is very confusing. For example, advertisements in brochures, Web sites and other marketing materials for meetings often refer to earning continuing education units (CEUs), or the provider reminds us to complete evaluations so we receive our CNEs. However, the credit actually offered at these meetings is contact hours, not CEUs. The list goes on.

Academic learning does not have this kind of issue. All learning is divided into semester credit hours (typically 15 weeks of meeting one to four times per week) or quarter credit hours (typically 10 weeks with the same meeting configuration). Although the latter is diminishing in popularity, the key is that we are all clear about the way in which academic credit is registered.

Continuing education does not have this clarity. I have transcripts (i.e., the pieces of paper or electronic files offered at the end of a meeting or course) that state how much credit I have earned, and most transcripts or certificates of learning list the number of contact hours earned for participating in a given course. I also have some transcripts that list the number of hours of CNEs I have earned; in general, I think these CNEs directly translate into contact hours. Then, I have a few transcripts that state I have earned 16 CEUs for a 3-day meeting. Using the official definition of the CEU would mean that in 3 days, I completed 160 hours of learning. That would mean no breaks, no teeth brushing, no sleep, and obviously poor math!

In addition to all of these variations and their respective calculations, which make more work for learners (I always think I might need to say, “Divide by 5 and carry your 2,” or something like that!), this lack of consistency could pose some difficulty for individuals who are certified and required to have a specific number of continuing education (CE) hours (or is that another new term?). In addition, what about those of us who live in states in which a certain number of CE hours is required for re-registration of a license to practice? Although my personal learning time always far exceeds the requirement for both certification and re-registration, what about our colleagues who just eke out the required number of hours? If CE credits are in various formats, could it be possible that those colleagues might not meet the requirements? Now, the issue takes on new meaning.

Because anyone can offer CE (just as anyone can open a college, but with a few additional challenges), we need to be clear about how we account for the way in which we acknowledge our learning. Few CE programs follow up with their learners after they complete the program offerings to see whether a change can be attributed to learning. In addition, sometimes the serendipitous outcome (i.e., what we learn unexpectedly) is more valuable than the anticipated changes in knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are expected from a particular learning event. So, our evaluation process is complex, and rightfully so. However, something like counting the numbers of hours in which an individual engaged in formal learning should not be a challenge. Perhaps we all need to agree on one term that accurately reflects the way in which we measure credit, just as academic institutions have done with respect to formal, degree-producing education. This is a challenge we can meet!