
STRENGTH AND CONDITIONING PROGRAM ACCREDITATION SUMMARY

CERTIFIED STRENGTH AND CONDITIONING SPECIALIST® (CSCS®)

The National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA) recently announced that by 2030 (target date) the eligibility for the Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist (CSCS) examination will require candidates to graduate with a Bachelor's degree in a strength and conditioning related field, from a program accredited by an NSCA-approved accrediting agency. This document will give the reader; important information on what these changes mean for current certificate holders, some background information about accreditation, and why the NSCA is making this change.

Current CSCS Certificate Holders:

There will be NO CHANGE for those already holding the CSCS certification credential. Current CSCS certified professionals will continue to follow current recertification guidelines to maintain their credential. The updated requirement to graduate from an NSCA approved accredited program is for candidates who will be taking the CSCS certification examination for the first time beginning in 2030 (targeted).

What is Accreditation?

Educational accreditation is a type of quality assurance process under which services and operations of educational institutions or programs are evaluated by an external body (accrediting agency) to determine if applicable standards are met. As such, there are two primary types of educational accreditation; institutional and programmatic. Most people are familiar with institutional accreditation in two- and four- year educational institutions as a means of assuring quality education within the college or university as a whole.

Programmatic accreditation (also known as specialized or professional accreditation) focuses on an individual program within a given university or college. The programmatic accreditation process validates that a college or university program meets all of the necessary requirements to qualify graduates for their respective profession. More specifically, programs must demonstrate that they are providing the general knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary for graduates to be successful in a strength and conditioning profession. The two types of accreditation often work synergistically, as most programmatic accrediting agencies will only accredit programs from universities that have secured institutional accreditation. Again, the new CSCS eligibility requirements targeted for 2030, will include holding a bachelor's degree in a strength and conditioning related field from an NSCA approved accredited program (programmatic accreditation).



Is Programmatic Accreditation Common in other Professions?

Programmatic accreditation is common in many professions including allied health professions. This is the traditional model in healthcare education. Graduation from an accredited program is often a requirement for credentialing within these professions. For example, medical doctors, physician assistants, nurses, and athletic trainers are all examples of professions that require universities to hold specialty program accreditation for their respective degree programs. Each of these professions have an accrediting agency that certifies or validates that colleges and universities are following the professional guidelines that ensure graduates can sit for their credentialing exams, and more importantly, are prepared to enter the workforce. Like other allied health professions, there is a need to ensure that strength and conditioning professionals are meeting the standards for employers regardless of level.

How is Educational Accreditation different from the Certification Accreditation?

Educational accreditation assures the quality of the educational program. Certification is the credentialing of the individual and will continue to be independently administered by the NSCA, as approved by the NSCA Certification Committee. It is important to note that the NSCA certification program is accredited by the Institute for Credentialing Excellence (ICE) that created the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA), which accredits credentialing organizations. The proposed educational accreditation is entirely separate.

The NSCA will support the creation of a separate educational accrediting group, which will be responsible for developing the curricular and programmatic standards and guidelines that schools must meet to apply for initial accreditation. The educational accrediting agency will also be responsible for periodically evaluating each program to determine whether those programs meet these curricular and programmatic guidelines for continued accreditation.

When will the NSCA Approved Accrediting Agency be formed?

The development of the NSCA approved accrediting agency is currently underway and is expected to be in place by 2021. It is expected that the first academic program will be eligible to apply for educational accreditation targeted for 2022.

Why is the NSCA making this transition?

This educational accreditation process will ensure that all strength and conditioning professionals are entering the field with similar baseline levels of knowledge, skills, and abilities, or in other words, have met the professional standards to be called a Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist. The NSCA feels the need to respond to professional demands and ensure Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialists meet professional standards. As an example, several professional and collegiate associations/leagues (Major League Baseball - MLB, The National Basketball Association – NBA, and The National Collegiate Athletic Association – NCAA, to name a few) have continued to call for higher level recommendations for the health and safety of their collegiate and professional athletes. This includes the recommendation for increased requirements for certified professionals. This new process will allow the NSCA to continue to be the gold standard for the profession. Educational accreditation will be the primary avenue by which the NSCA differentiates itself from other certifying organizations and directly meets the needs of the employers that hire NSCA certified professionals.

Currently, there is a disparity in the preparation of strength and conditioning professionals compared with peer allied health professions. The current requirement for individuals wishing to earn the CSCS certification is that they hold a bachelor's degree (in any discipline), be certified in CPR/AED, and pass a certification exam. The NSCA has examined the preparation of its professionals and intends to do everything possible to ensure the health and safety of the athletes. Therefore,



the NSCA Education and Certification Committees and the Board of Directors (in consideration of the membership and their constituencies), feel that this degree requirement needs to change and evolve to include degree requirements that are specific to the profession. This, in turn, will create a higher standard for strength and conditioning professionals that are truly prepared to enter the field of strength and conditioning and will elevate the level of confidence employers have in the CSCS certification.

How will the accreditation standards be developed?

A group of qualified volunteers will develop a draft of the standards, and publish them for public commentary. This will allow the public and all NSCA members to have the opportunity to voice their opinions regarding requirements for educational accreditation, including the knowledge, skills, and abilities for individuals wanting to enter the strength and conditioning profession. The standards will be a listing of educational requirements each degree program must meet to be accredited. Input will be considered in the revision of the standards before they are finalized. The input from stakeholder groups (including employers) is important in the development of the standards to ensure that they are meeting the needs of the profession. These standards will then become the quality benchmark for educational institutions to determine whether college/university programs meet the requirements for students to enter the field of strength and conditioning.

What will the accreditation process be?

For those not familiar with the educational accreditation process, the steps typically involve an application, self-study, on-site evaluation, review and recommendation, and finally a determination of accreditation is rendered. It is important to note that accreditation is a peer-review process.

The following will outline each of step in this process of accreditation individually:

Application/Enrollment

The first step of the educational accreditation process is the application or enrollment. This allows a college/university to learn more about the accreditation process and let the accrediting agency know they are interested in accreditation by filing an application.

Self-study

The second step is for the college/university to complete a self-study, or in other words, complete the process of a self-assessment. Self-study is typically a year-long program assessment involving program faculty, administrators, assessment officers, and students. Each program will need to show that they comply with the applicable standards by providing documentation of compliance for each standard. The self-study materials are sent to the accrediting agency and dispersed to peer- reviewers who will conduct an on-site assessment.

On-Site Assessment (peer-review)

The third step includes; the site visit team to review the self-study materials and communicate with the program regarding any missing or confusing material. An on-site assessment for the program will then be scheduled, which includes; a group of trained assessors to visit the college/university to interview faculty, students, administrators, etc. to ensure they are indeed in compliance with the standards and validate the self-study.



Review/Recommendation

The fourth step includes; once the final report is completed, it is sent back to the program for a response to any noncompliant standards. The program will have a specified period of time to respond to the report.

Final Decision

Once all responses (sometimes called a rejoinder) to any non-compliant issues are received and reviewed, it will then go to the accrediting board or review committee for final determination of compliance. As part of the process, a period of accreditation will be determined, which typically varies. The program within the college/university must maintain compliance during this accreditation period and submit annual accreditation reports. Application for continuing accreditation will occur at the end of the accreditation period and the process will repeat itself.

What is the Expected Timeline Moving Forward?

Full implementation of the new eligibility requirement for the CSCS certification credential will take effect by 2030 (target date). Beyond 2030, graduation from an NSCA approved accredited strength and conditioning related program will be the new eligibility requirement for the CSCS certification credential.

How are the Education Recognition Program (ERP) schools affected?

Designation as an Education Recognition Program (ERP) school DOES NOT automatically guarantee that the recognized program meets the requirements for educational accreditation. However, it is anticipated that many of the current requirements for undergraduate ERP approval will be consistent with the requirements of an accredited program. All ERP schools will need to go through the same accreditation process as non-ERP schools. The undergraduate recognition portion of the ERP program is expected to be phased out completely by 2030 (target date).

How can I provide input into the development of the education accreditation standards?

There will be opportunities for the membership and the public to help guide the process and development of the accreditation standards. Input (public comment) will be welcomed regarding the development of the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary for a CSCS certified professional, as well as any requirements within the educational program that are necessary to protect the students, faculty, and public. This opportunity will ensure that entry-level strength coaches are prepared for the profession and remain the gold standard in strength and conditioning that we so proudly hold.