

# **A Discussion Paper on Advancing a Certification System for First Nation Administrators**

*Do I want to be a Certified First Nation Administrator?*

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## A. Introduction

This paper looks at certification for the First Nation Administrators' occupational group. The group consists of approximately 600 individuals occupying senior staff positions in First Nation organizations. They often have titles such as: Band Manager; Band Administrator; First Nation Manager; or First Nation Administrator. While First Nations have varying levels of population and financial resources, there are many common administration and operations performance expectations for First Nation Administrators (FNAs).

The FNA group plays a key role in supporting governance and decision making, and in developing and implementation of policy and programs for First Nations. In order to fulfill this role, the FNA must have an extensive list of functional and enabling competencies. Without a substantial number of needed competencies in place, the lack of key knowledge, skills, and attitude will be missing. This will affect governance and operations of a First Nation.

Based on the systems the Indian Act supports and government requirements, a FNA needs a Deputy responsible for Community Services, a Deputy for Provincial Programs and Relations, a Deputy for Federal Programs and Relations and so on. The FNA has an extremely complex position which calls for competencies in economic development and entrepreneurial enterprises, community services (municipal), and provincial and federal program and affairs and in many other areas. In smaller communities, the FNA is also the Chief Financial Officer and often performs many other duties as well. The resources for the required support are not available. In a smaller community, an FNA could spend one half of his/her time filling out forms to obtain or report on funding from 10 or more groups. And, of course, the FNA is often held responsible when things go wrong from a governance and operations perspective. There is often a gap between what the system requires and the resources available to meet the system expectations.

The typical FNA position description indicates that the FNA is responsible for the management, administration and delivery of all programs and services in order to ensure the needs of members are met in a reasonable, effective and efficient manner. The FNA reports to Chief and Council. Depending on the governance style applied in a First Nation, the FNA may also report to individual Council members, committees, and boards. This provides for a wide scope of responsibilities which often includes:

- Managing all operations and ensuring that all operations are conducted in a respectful and responsible way
- Ensuring that all decisions and actions meet the relevant legislation, policies and procedures.
- Managing financial plans, budgets and operations
- Managing and supervising staff
- Managing the delivery of programs and services
- Providing Council support
- Other related duties as required

It is the last item that that can require a lot of attention, and without suitable resources these other related duties will reduce performance in other areas.

Some of the other related duties involve land use planning, royalty sharing agreements, financial planning and investments, strategic alliances, shared service arrangements, public, media and government relations, and other “nation building” activities such as community visioning and self-government structures, processes and content.

First Nations also require clear policy and effective orientations to ensure the FNA’s role, responsibilities and expectations are clear and understood.

Resources to support “nation building” activities and the Indian Act and its systems are not always available and therefore intense pressure is put on FNAs to stay on top of their games and juggle priorities. This requires intense preparation and ongoing professional development. With such a reliance on one individual, it is paramount that First Nations are able to engage professional FNAs who are certified and have met and continue to meet specified academic, experience and leadership standards.

Certification is seen as a means to advance the capacity of FNAs, and in turn, First Nations. On the assumption that certification for this group is an investment in human capital which will benefit First Nations governance and operations, aspects of moving forward are considered.

Certification provides an opportunity to identify competency standards, and develop and measure individuals to the competency standards. It will also establish ethical standards and provide valuable networking and other services normally provided to a professional group

This paper provides information on certification and related issues such as establishing a professional group. Establishing a certification program can be complex. The feasibility of putting a program in place is considered. To support a certification program, an organization to govern and administer the certification program is required, and approaches and options are considered. Understanding lessons learned from others can improve the chances of successfully implementing a certification program.

Information to advance a certification system for FNAs is provided to determine interest and support decision making.

### **Current Situation and Future Expectations**

As noted, the role of the FNA is complex. This role will continually change as policies and programs change and First Nations assume greater control in planning, developing and delivering First Nation services. In turn, the competency tool kit for FNAs will continue to expand. With limited staff support, as is the case in a considerable number of First Nations, the FNA often needs to go beyond merely understanding a concept to being able to apply the concept.

This means, the program to prepare an individual to become a certified FNA needs to be broad and extensive, as will be the need for ongoing professional learning activities.

There is a need to ensure that individuals being recruited into FNA positions have a minimum level of competencies required to perform, and are provided with learning opportunities to develop or strengthen their competencies.

A number of educational programs provide courses for FNAs throughout Canada. However, access, type, and the style of delivery can be a problem in meeting FNA needs. Without a certification program and expected competency standards, these courses are not necessarily linked to a specific career ladder. Establishing a career ladder with appropriate supports for one of the most important and influential non-elected position in a First Nations is must.

Certification programs and adopted competency standards provide guidance that will assist educational and professional organizations to develop relevant courses for the professional group.

Discussions with a number of FNAs both as individuals and in focus groups indicate a need for career supports. Networking, learning opportunities for FNAs and those they work with, recognition and clarification on roles and responsibilities and performance expectations are all required.

A number of FNAs have had limited prior experience in First Nation Administration at a senior level prior to taking on their position. There are no clear career routes to becoming a FNA. However, a number of Certified Aboriginal Financial Managers (CAFMs) have gone on to become FNAs as many competencies are similar.

Some FNAs are in work situations where they are missing key competencies. Some are looking for ways to update their competencies in order to meet to meet performance expectations. Updating can be a challenge. It is not always possible to take a month off work during Nation building activities to travel somewhere and take a course. FNAs are busy individuals and looking for non traditional learning opportunities and career supports normally provided by a professional association.

## **Certification**

It seems that everybody is becoming certified. Within the last 15 years a considerable number of occupational groups have established certification programs. The Federal Government through its Human Resources Department, has funded a number of Sector Councils and specific groups to establish occupational standards and certification programs.

As groups established certification programs, the following common elements are part of the programs:

- Competency Standards
- Ethical Standards
- Certification Standards (two years of relevant work experience, professional examination, maintenance of certification through 20 or more hours of ongoing professional learning)

In most cases, an organization of individuals representative of the occupational group was in place prior to establishing a certification program. The association often provides member services that include a conference, learning activities and other member services. The association has the responsibly for establishing the certification program and its ongoing administration and delivery. After a certification program is put in place, an increase in learning activities and member services for the occupational group occurs.

It should be noted that individuals pursuing certification are not always working in the direct occupational area. For example, it may be possible that a Housing Program Administrator would like to become a FNA and is on the career ladder by taking courses that are part of the certification program. In this example, many of the competencies developed to be a FNA would also support the Housing Program Administrator in their position.

Is Certification of FNAs possible? Based on what other small occupational groups have done with limited funding, the answer is “yes”. Of course, the availability of financial and volunteer resources affect the quality and awareness of a certification program. When resources are limited, understanding the lessons learned by others who have put a certification program in place is critical.

## **B. Lessons Learned**

One Aboriginal group that has been successful in implementing a certification program is the Aboriginal Financial Officers Association of Canada (AFOA). In fact, this organization received a Community Based Learning Opportunities Award from the Conference Board of Canada in 2006.

AFOA is a non-for-profit, non-political body focused on capacity development initiatives. It has close to 1,296 members of which 306 have been awarded the professional designation Certified Aboriginal Financial Manager (CAFM).

The educational program leading to the CAFM is called the Aboriginal Financial Management program. The program consists of 14 courses. Five of these courses are based to the Canadian Aboriginal context and delivered through the Internet with AFOA. The courses are based on the CAFM competency standard.

Approximately 150 students register annually with AFOA for CAFM Internet-based course. A greater number of students are taking courses with education providers who deliver courses that will provide the student with advanced standing when conditions are met.

Upon completion of the program, candidates are eligible to write the CAFM professional exam. Candidates who are successful on the exam and have 24 months of full-time practical work experience gained in an Aboriginal financial management environment are awarded the professional designation CAFM. The CAFM is one of the preferred credentials for Aboriginal financial and management positions.

Individuals with the CAFM are required to meet a Maintenance of Certification requirement and complete a required number of hours of continuing professional learning each year. To support ongoing professional learning, AFOA has a Journal, conference, workshops, chapter education sessions, and other Internet-based courses.

Learning activities and other resources such as career services, scholarships, fellowships, awards, toolkits, best practices, discussion boards, and reference documents are provided through a portal described as the Aboriginal Centre for Finance and Management Excellence.

AFOA's capacity building activities are creating positive change in Aboriginal communities. AFOA members are using their new knowledge and skills to influence change and improvements.

AFOA has helped other Aboriginal organizations with learning activities and is playing a key role in developing an Aboriginal Housing Manager's Educational and Certification Program. AFOA is being used as a model for a First Nations Housing Managers Association.

AFOA was incorporated in July, 1999. It has come a long way and is deemed a successful organization. It has caught up to and in some cases passed some other professional groups that have been around for over 30 years or more. This success is based on understanding needs and providing value to those who wish to engage in self or organizational capacity development in financial management areas. One of the compelling reasons to join and continue to be part of AFOA is the certification program.

Many other occupational groups have put certification in place and it is essential to look at their experiences to see what lessons can be learned. A listing of some key lessons learned is provided based on work with over a dozen certification programs, including AFOA and the CAFM, and student discussions and assignments from those responsible for professional association certification programs.

- Certification will help to attract and retain members, but do not expect to generate significant new revenues after expenditures from a certification program are considered.
- The organization needs to be able to provide recognized value and attract a good share of the market prior to establishing a certification program.
- Base certification standards on minimum competency levels.
- The professional designation certificate remains the property of the professional organization.
- A new certification program should not be too rigorous at first or it will be deemed overly difficult.
- A new certification program should be implemented in phases. When a target critical mass is reached, a new phase is implemented.
- Offer alternative methods to certification such as Prior Learning Recognition to avoid erecting unfair barriers and recognize those who are currently qualified and doing the work.
- During start up use a special arrangements policy and process to recognize those who meet the competency standards.
- For those who do not have all the requirements, offer special education support to prepare them for the professional exam.
- Professional groups need the same brand or designation and the same standards throughout the country.
- Maintenance of Certification requirements should be realistic and linked to competencies, and should be phased in over time.
- The organization must be able to deliver on the members' needs to meet Maintenance of Certification Requirements.
- Standards of Ethical conduct and related competencies should be part of the educational program and professional examination.
- Processes to support ethical conduct administration must be fair.
- Use administrative processes that are efficient and timely.
- Many resources do not guarantee a successful professional certification program.
- Some small groups with 100 members have similar standards to groups with 50,000 or more and can be quite successful in meeting member needs.
- Create awareness of the certification program with key stakeholders so they will understand the value of the designation and give preference to those who have met standards.
- Monitor the education program to determine where and when it is more efficient to develop and deliver in-house or outsource to learning partners.
- Use convocation, oath, and a certificate to create a "sense of belonging" with members.
- Promote accomplishments of individuals that have completed the certification program.
- As a minimum, update competency standards every five years.
- Market the professional designation brand more than the organization name.
- Develop career tracks or ladders from colleges, universities and occupational groups.
- Recognize outstanding performance in the certification program.
- Provide scholarships to individuals with limited resources to pursue the certification program.
- Do not under or overprice the program.

The above will serve as a guide in terms of developing a certification program.

A paper “Needs, Best Practices, and Options for a BC First Nations Certification Program for a First Nations Governance Administration and Management Program” prepared by Wendy Magahay for The School of Public Administration, University of Victoria and The National Centre for First Nations Governance, address Indicators for Successful First Nations Learning and Governance and Indicators for Successful Certification Systems. This paper provides background information that helps to elaborate on some of the concepts being advanced in this paper.

## C. Establishing a Professional Association

Certification programs are usually linked to associations. A host or sponsor is required for a certification program. In almost all cases, the host or sponsor is a professional association or a regulated college. It is rare to have a professional association formed just for the purpose of establishing a certification program. When the basic needs such as networking, having a voice, and becoming the resource for the occupational group are in place, attention usually turns to becoming more of a professional group, and standards and certification programs are put in place.

### *Is there a need for an association of FNAs?*

The need can be determined and influenced by practitioners in the occupational group and by other stakeholders. A meeting of practitioners will help to identify if there is enough interest and the feasibility can be reviewed. If there is a need, an association that is established must understand what its member's value, and have a clear purpose and supportive strategy. The purpose of a professional association is to develop excellence for the profession, deliver standards and services to support excellence, and provide some type of public benefit. It would be expected that services provided would need to meet other needs along with certification.

### *Who would be members of the association?*

Membership in the Certified First Nation Administrators Association will not be restricted to only those who are certified. A professional organization exists to help those working in the occupational area and those who aspire to future positions in the occupational area. In effect, the membership would also include individuals who are working as a FNA but are not certified. It could also include CAFMs, program managers or other senior level administrators who hope to become a FNA.

### *What are the requirements to start up an organization?*

Key requirements to starting up an organization are a passion for the profession, dedicated volunteer leaders, and members with interest and funding resources. Support from other stakeholders such as employers, governments and other groups can be most helpful.

There are different approaches to putting a professional association in place in Canada.

- A. Incorporate on a provincial/ territorial basis.
- B. Incorporate on a national basis.
- C. Undertake A and B at the same time.
- D. AFOA Canada broadens its mandate, changes its name and structures to accommodate a FNA group.

The approaches selected are often based on interest and best use of resources.

### **Approach A – Provincial/Territorial**

Only a small group of FNAs are required to establish the association. That is the easy part. It then gets more complex as resources are required to develop and deliver services for members.

A pilot approach is a good way to engage FNAs at the grassroots level to see if an association is feasible. The pilot may result in the development of services that can be applied in other provinces, territories or regions. This, of course, is conditional on sufficient funding being obtained for a pilot project. Costs with this approach may be considered high given the smaller number of members. However, if the deliverables are transferable to other future provincial/territorial groups or individuals, this will eventually reduce the costs. This approach treated as a pilot project may minimize risk for funders.

Certification would most likely not occur during a pilot project involving one or two provinces or territories. Others would be required in order to establish national standards to make the designation portable and relevant. If the pilot project is a success, a national association would be established.

### **Approach B - National**

It is possible to first establish a national association, and later establish provincial/territorial associations as interest and resources develop. The national association can coordinate the development of the provincial/territorial associations or networks. The connection with the grassroots is somewhat limited in terms of local organized delivery of services until the provincial/territorial associations or networks are put in place. On the other hand, the certification program can be put in place on a timely basis with this approach.

Going national can attract a larger number of members as the overall size of the FNA group is quite small. There would be a larger number of memberships and user fees than if it was done on solely a provincial basis. In fact, a number of smaller unregulated professional groups do not establish formal provincial/territorial associations. They do, however, operate informal networks at the regional level.

Funding support may be easier to obtain on a national basis. AFOA's success as a national organization may influence support for funding. Professional groups that have a strong national association tend to get established sooner, experience growth faster and make better use of resources.

### **Approach C – Undertake A and B at the same time**

While this approach is possible and will make things happen sooner, it is complex and requires extensive initial funding.

### **Approach D – AFOA Canada broadens its mandate, changes its name and structures to accommodate a FNA group.**

By using this approach, it is possible to build on policies, processes and structure available. AFOA currently caters to financial and management aspects and is increasing its capacity in the management area. AFOA could change its name to something like “Aboriginal Financial and

Management Association”. In fact, AFOA currently has 330 management individuals as part of its membership. This represents 25 percent of its membership and this group continues to grow.

The association structure could be revised to accommodate an FNA group. AFOA could also cater to other management groups or program managers generally. The structure could have a variety of sections or councils with representatives on the Board. Examples are, the CAFM Council, FNA Council, Program Manager Council, Aboriginal Technology Council, etc. The existing AFOA Chapters would most likely need to restructure as well to accommodate a broader mandate.

Working to establish an arrangement with AFOA Canada and the AFOA Chapters would require the formation of an FNA group. The potential exists that this regional represented group could become the FNA council.

A variation on this approach could involve a FNA group contracting services from AFOA on a shared services arrangement.

### *Is it feasible to establish a FNA organization?*

It is feasible to start up a FNA organization. However, the extent of development and value provided are subject to resources. It is possible to develop and provide services one would expect from a professional association based on resources being available for all the approaches noted. The quickest and possibly easiest Approach is D – AFOA Canada, as they currently have the infrastructure, services, certification, education, chapters, conference, and expertise in place.

However, with this approach it may take some time to develop grassroots connections and delivery of certain types of services at the local level. Another important factor to consider is that AFNs may wish to have more control over their organization and their own separate identity.

Input from potential FNAs, AFOA Canada, and AFOA Chapters will help to determine which approach is best.

## D. Establishing a Certification Program

### Certification Program Interest

FNAs and employers, the Chief and Council, could be asked if a certification program is required. The response provided is often related to the value that certification would bring. In some cases, overworked FNAs may understand the value, but have neither the interest or the time to pursue certification. At the same time, the FNA's Chief and Council may want the FNA to pursue certification. Other situations could apply as well. Third party groups such as government generally support certification efforts that will enhance capacity and protect the public. It is difficult to get many positive responses to questions on value and interest without an understanding of some aspects or details that would apply to the certification program. If a Certified First Nation Administrator (CFNA) designation or something similar was put in place, what value could it provide?

### Value of Certification

Potential benefits of a certification program are:

#### *For the First Nation Administrator Profession*

- Increases the visibility and legitimacy of the profession
- Provides for compensation improvements
- Establishes and maintains standards of practice, ethics and public protection
- Facilitates greater consistency of practice given the varied backgrounds of individuals experience and academic preparation.
- Encourages members to achieve high standards
- Improves public perceptions

#### *For Individual CFNAs*

- Elevates the knowledge and skill level of workers in the field and stimulates ongoing training and development
- Provides professional recognition and credibility
- Provides a credential for those who do not have a degree
- Improves career opportunities
- Provides mentors
- Provides knowledge to get the job done

#### *Employers*

- Improves quality of services
- Provides a means to verify knowledge and skills
- Expects professional conduct
- Provides knowledge of the latest and best practices
- Improves productivity
- Provides ability to recruit and retain
- Increases morale and commitment
- Protects the public from incompetent individuals

Key components of a certification program include the following:

### **Competencies**

Competency standards are part of a certification program and would be required. In 2003, the Hay Group as part of the First Nations Public Service Initiative First Nation Administrator – Primary Duties and Core Competencies. The competencies are grouped into eight major functional categories and four enabling categories:

#### Functional

- Policy
- Financial
- Council
- Staff
- Government Relations
- Community Relations
- Planning
- Practical Reserve Issues

#### Enabling

- Thinking Capabilities
- Leadership Effectiveness
- Self Management
- Social Awareness

The document supports the above with specific details. This information is a good starting point for the development of competencies. Updating could perhaps involve moving to a similar competency model used by AFOA and incorporate expectations of the FNA in “nation building” activities.

### **Ethical Standards**

Ethics are the cornerstone of a professional association. Ethics are part of the competencies, education program, and professional exam that support a certification program. Current ethical standards being used by AFOA are applicable to the FNA group. If changes are required they would be minimal.

### **Education Program**

In order to write the professional exam, completion of a program of education is required. The education program consists of professional courses that are linked to the competencies. Programs require core courses and, in some situations where the scope of professional practice is wide, there may be a requirement to complete all core courses and a specific number of elective courses.

Some of the courses required to cover FNA competencies may include:

- Strategy and Decision Making
- Financial Management
- Human Resource Management
- Communications and Relationships
- First Nations Governance
- Administrative Law
- First Nations Operations
- Developments and Issues in Nation Building
- Program Management
- Management Practices
- Other elective courses supporting the competencies

It should be noted there is a strong link between the above type of courses and the AFOA courses as a possible source. A chart has been developed to show the link and a possible education program.

<b>Possible FNA Courses</b>	<b>Sources for Courses</b>
<b><i>Core Courses</i></b>	
First Nations Governance	To be developed
Strategy and Decision Making	AFOA with updating/revisions
Financial Management	To be developed
Human Resource Management	AFOA with updating/revisions
Communications and Relationships	To be developed
Administrative Law	AFOA with updating/revisions
First Nations Operations	To be developed
Developments and Issues in Nation Building	To be developed
Aboriginal Management Practices 1	AFOA with updating/revisions
Aboriginal Management Practices 2	AFOA with updating/revisions
Aboriginal Program Management	AFOA with updating/revisions
<b><i>Electives (three required)</i></b>	
Community Economic Development	AFOA with updating/revisions
Values and Ethics in the Aboriginal Workplace	AFOA
Performance Measurement and Reporting	AFOA
Aboriginal History and Developments	AFOA
Introduction to Comprehensive Community Planning in First Nations	AFOA
Others as determined by competency standards	Other post secondary or First Nations institution approved courses

### **Work Experience**

Certification programs have criteria that specifies a certain amount and type of work experience. The work experience requirement is usually a minimum of two years of work experience related to the competencies. Work experience is often reviewed and attested to by sponsors and/or mentors.

### **Professional Exam**

Certification programs have criteria that requires successful completion of a professional exam. All aspiring professional recognition provided by a certification program must write the professional exam. There are some exceptions, such as when a professional association has a rigorous prior learning and recognition program. When a new certification program is being put in place, the professional association usually provides senior practitioners with a special arrangement where individuals can present a portfolio to demonstrate that they have the competencies through prior education and experience.

### **Maintenance of Certification**

Certification programs have a requirement that professionals continue to engage in professional learning in order to remain a professional. Many groups require that the professional engage in 20 to 30 hours of professional learning per year, or the equivalent on average over a three or five year period. There are usually many different possible ways to engage in learning activities and meet the requirements.

These preceding elements are the key standards and criteria that need to be put in place to develop a credible certification program.

## E. Moving Forward

Two key determinants in terms of moving forward are interest on the part of FNAs to establish a professional association and the funding necessary to develop the association and the certification program.

**Is a professional group for First Nation Administrators required?** Based on working with various occupational groups, new and shifting competencies to support “nation building”, I believe the answer is “yes”. Consultation will help determine the level of interest.

**Would a certification program enhance overall capacity of this group and is it viable?** Certification programs provide standards and ongoing development. This improves capacity. The certification program could be viable in a short period of time if a significant investment of funds were provided to help move things forward. If the significant investment were not available, progress for the group and the certification would be extremely slow and it would take many years until the effort was deemed to be viable.

An indication of reasonable interest and the identification of some champions for the professionalization of First Nations Administration will get things going. Support from Chief and Council and other Aboriginal organizations will help when funding is being sought. The initial group of champions can play a role in the identification of funding and determining a preferred approach to organization and development of the FNA professional group.

Moving forward with the concept of a certification program and its eventual implementation will result in developing a key group of individuals who will help support First Nations dealing with difficult challenges and pursuing aspirations. It is in the interest of First Nation leaders and First Nation people to ensure professionally certified First Nation Administrators are involved in the journey of nation building.

## **Becoming a Certified First Nations Administrator (CFNA)**

This information is presented only as a means to enrich the discussion about establishing a certification program for First Nation Administrators.

### ***Do I want to be a Certified First Nation Administrator?***

If you want to be involved in high level strategy in a First Nation and play a leadership role in implementing strategy and plans and managing complex operations, then you may be interested in working as a First Nations Administrator and becoming a CFNA.

Individuals with the CFNA will be sought after by First Nations organizations. The holder of the CFNA designation identifies the holder as a highly qualified management professional in tune with today's challenges, with clearly defined and well developed competencies that today's First Nations want and need. The CFNA can be your ticket to a challenging and successful career. It can provide you with a competitive edge in pursuing key positions and delivering quality services.

A CFNA is a highly-skilled professional who is committed to personal career development, standards of ethical conduct gaining insight and knowledge into the most advanced and up-to-date management practices and tools in an Aboriginal context.

### ***How do I become a Certified First Nation Administrator?***

In order to become a CFNA you must be a member of the professional association and meet the requirements of the certification program. The requirements are:

- **Successful completion of the CFNA Education Program.** The program can be completed by taking 14 courses. This requires successful completion of 11 core courses and 3 electives. All courses are available online. Some of the courses may be taken from accredited learning partners and advanced standing may be provided.
- **Completion of two years of practical work experience verified by two sponsors.** The work experience must be as a FNA. One sponsor is required from Chief and Council and the other from another FNA.
- **Successful completion of the professional exam.** To pass the three hour exam a mark of 60 percent or higher is required.
- **Remain a member in good standing.** To remain a member in good standing, a member must be in compliance with the Ethical Standard; engage in at least 20 hours of continuous professional learning on an annual basis; and pay the required dues and fees.
- **Transitional Special Arrangement.** If you have more than 15 years of progressive experience as a First Nation Administrator, you are invited to complete a portfolio of your education and experience to determine your advanced standing towards the CFNA professional designation.