

# Evolution of a Profession: The Role of Accreditation in Lactation Education

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breastfeeding, International Lactation Consultant Association, lactation, lactation consultant, lactation education, program evaluation

The birth of a formal lactation consultant profession began more than 30 years ago with the establishment of the International Lactation Consultant Association<sup>®</sup> (ILCA) and the International Board of Lactation Consultant Examiners<sup>®</sup> (IBLCE), which have worked in concert to guide the development of professional and ethical standards, a scope of practice, a core curriculum, and clinical competencies (Howett & Lauwers, 2013). Since its inception in 1985, the lactation consultant profession has grown immensely. Whereas 248 first-time candidates took the IBLCE exam in 1985, more than 2,700 sat for the exam in 2015 in more than 600 locations across 61 countries and in 17 languages (J. Lauwers, personal communication, March 14, 2017; Fabrey & Chuang, 2016). Although the profession has developed and matured significantly during this time, Dodgson (2016) reminds us that “the profession of lactation consulting is in its infancy and experiencing growing pains . . . and continue[s] to define roles and responsibilities with the lactation specialty” (p. 592).

As has been the case with other emerging allied health professions, standardization of lactation education to improve professionalism and patient care has been a commonly discussed topic in peer-reviewed journal commentaries, at professional conferences, and at national/international meetings. Dodgson (2016) recently discussed the professionalization of lactation practice, comparing the growing pains of the nursing profession to what is now occurring within the field of lactation. Howett and Lauwers’ 2013 commentary emphasized the importance of standardizing lactation education to improve professionalism and patient care. Although lactation practice has firmly been rooted as an allied health profession, it continues to work “toward a level of educational preparation similar to that of other allied health professions” (p. 450). The authors of both commentaries recognize the diversity of professional and education backgrounds of certificants and acknowledge the need for a clear definition of the roles of lactation professionals.

Matters of equity, quality, and continuous improvement are a central focus of IBLCE and ILCA. In 2008, with the goal of establishing standards in lactation consultant education, ILCA and IBLCE collaborated to establish and sponsor the Lactation Education Accreditation and Approval Review

Committee (LEAARC) (Howett & Lauwers, 2013). With a vision toward high-quality professional lactation education, LEAARC’s mission is to establish standards for, and recognize quality in, lactation education. The endorsement of educational courses by LEAARC has been a first step in standardizing the education preparation of International Board Certified Lactation Consultants<sup>®</sup> (IBCLCs). As the lactation consultant profession continues to evolve, the next step in this process has been the accreditation of academic lactation programs that provide a comprehensive curriculum based on the core curriculum as well as oversight of clinical experiences mapped to required clinical competencies.

## Historical Context

Understanding the evolutionary nature of the profession is essential before the role that accreditation plays in lactation education can be appreciated. Several studies have documented the movement from breastfeeding to bottle feeding worldwide. This change in feeding practices has been tied to multiple factors, including changes in social environment, the commercialization of infant feeding, and increased reliance on medical authority (Apple, 1994). Particularly egregious, the unscrupulous marketing of artificial milk substitutes contributed substantially to the decline of breastfeeding in the developing world (Heer, 1966). As a result of the confluence of these contextual factors, help with breastfeeding through the shared knowledge of other family members, neighbors, and friends was lost or nearly lost in most societies.

Volunteer mother-to-mother support groups (i.e., La Leche League) became the predominant source of assistance

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and information about breastfeeding. These volunteers promoted breastfeeding and began to search for scientific information on the topic. Likewise, healthcare providers slowly began to take notice and recognized the important role that volunteers had in assisting mothers with breastfeeding, and experienced volunteers began to seek paid employment. As this specialized body of knowledge and skills developed, the need for research and its dissemination increased. By 1982, La Leche League International formed its Lactation Consultant Department, and in 1985, the profession was formalized with the establishment of ILCA and IBLCE (La Leche League International, 2012; Schudel, 2006).

## Eligibility Criteria

Today, individuals enter the lactation field from a variety of education and experiential backgrounds. To establish standards in preparation for the IBCLC credential, IBLCE developed education and practice requirements for individuals applying to take the certification exam. Currently, there are three methods, or pathways, by which candidates can fulfill eligibility criteria. In 2012, IBLCE increased the education requirement from 45 to 90 hours of lactation education, addressing topics listed on the IBLCE Blueprint, now titled *Detailed Content Outline* (IBLCE, 2014).

To date, a structured course is not required for those using Pathway 1 or 3 criteria when preparing to sit for the IBCLC certification exam. Candidates may obtain didactic hours through a variety of educational programs, courses, and programmatic offerings. In their 2013 commentary, Howett and Lauwers suggested that a requirement of completing a peer-reviewed educational course would improve consistency in education preparation of exam candidates, and this consistency would “move the profession forward to ensure adequate preparation for IBCLC practice” (p. 450). LEAARC provides peer review of lactation and breastfeeding education offered in a variety of settings throughout the world. These courses offer a diversity of educational models including distance education, self-paced programs, college-based programs, and those that are not-for-profit and for-profit. Although completion of any specific lactation course cannot guarantee that a candidate will be successful in passing the certification exam administered by IBLCE, students who complete education endorsed by LEAARC can be assured that these courses have qualified faculty and cover essential topics and skills (LEAARC, 2016).

## LEAARC Endorsement

LEAARC currently offers two levels of course endorsement: Approval and Recognition. LEAARC Approval is granted to courses that provide 90 or more hours of didactic instruction in lactation management and teach the competencies in the LEAARC curriculum. These courses provide the minimum education requirement for individuals who are planning to

pursue certification as an IBCLC. The new category of LEAARC Recognition was initiated in 2016. This endorsement is awarded to courses that provide between 40 and 89 hours of didactic lactation education and whose stated mission is to prepare students as breastfeeding educators or counselors. A LEAARC Recognized course covers a portion of the LEAARC curriculum with a primary focus on anticipatory guidance, assistance, and support in the normal course of breastfeeding as well as family education. As with the LEAARC Approved courses, LEAARC Recognition assures students that these courses have been reviewed for quality in both educational content and course faculty (see Table 1). Descriptions of LEAARC Approved and Recognized courses can be found on the LEAARC website (<http://www.leaarc.org/>) as well as information about how to apply for LEAARC endorsement of a lactation course.

## Accreditation of Academic Lactation Programs

Whereas IBLCE does not require exam candidates following Pathways 1 and 3 to enroll in a standardized education course, IBLCE has set specific education requirements for Pathway 2 programs. Until recently, IBLCE reviewed and granted approval to Pathway 2 programs. These were academic programs in human lactation and breastfeeding that were verified to provide 90 hours of didactic education as well as 300 hours of directly supervised clinical practice in lactation management (IBLCE, 2017).

IBLCE instituted a new policy to take effect January 1, 2018, that identifies accreditation as the best method of ensuring quality and consistency of Pathway 2 programs. By that date, all Pathway 2 programs are required to achieve accreditation through the Commission on Accreditation of Allied Health Education Programs (CAAHEP) or an equivalent accreditation provider. The Commission on Accreditation of Allied Health Education Programs is the largest programmatic accreditor in the health sciences field (CAAHEP, 2017). Research indicates that allied health professions use programmatic accreditation as a method of building a competent health workforce by verifying that certain criteria have been met to ensure the quality of training taking place within those institutions (World Health Organization, 2013).

Accreditation is a tool intended to help assure a well-prepared and qualified workforce providing specific healthcare services. It is an effort to “assess the quality of institutions, programs and services, measuring them against agreed-upon standards and thereby assuring that they meet those standards” (CAAHEP, 2017, para. 1). According to the Institute of Medicine (2003), it is program accreditation, combined with professional certification for confirming professional competence, that professions use to reassure employers and the public of the capability of its workforce.

As with other allied health professions, the lactation specialty now benefits from having an independent body providing oversight of the quality of academic programs taught

**Table 1.** Lactation Education Accreditation and Approval Review Committee–Endorsed Courses.

Endorsed lactation courses	Location
<b>Recognized courses (40 to 89 hours)</b>	
California State University, Northridge	California, USA
Global Lactation Education Associates	North Carolina, USA
Lactation Education Consultants	Illinois, USA
Lactation Education Resources (2 courses)	Maryland, USA
Northwest Area Health Education Center	North Carolina, USA
Wichita State University	Kansas, USA
<b>Approved courses (90 hours or more)</b>	
Academia Edupró	Puerto Rico
Arizona State University	Arizona, USA
Breastfeeding Outlook	Virginia, USA
Bright Future Learning Resource Center, Ltd.	Ohio, USA
Centre for Breastfeeding Education	Ontario, Canada
Danish Community Health Education	Copenhagen, Denmark
Deborah Robertson	Kent, UK
Douglas College	British Columbia, Canada
Health e-Learning	Quebec, Canada
Healthy Children Project, Inc.	Massachusetts, USA
International Institute of Human Lactation	Quebec, Canada
Lactation Education Consultants	Illinois, USA
Lactation Education Resources	Maryland, USA
Mohawk College of Applied Arts & Technology	Ontario, Canada
ProMAMA Center	Bucuresti, Romania
Riverside University Health System–Public Health	California, USA

Note. Table is current as of March 2017. Detailed information about each of the courses can be found at <http://www.leaarc.org/>.

through postsecondary institutions. Currently, three Pathway 2 programs have completed the accreditation process and have been awarded initial accreditation by CAAHEP (see Table 2). Three additional programs are working toward accreditation. Whereas efforts are under way to promote greater globalization of formal lactation education opportunities, to date all Pathway 2 programs are located within the United States. This is likely the reason that no international programs have yet pursued program accreditation.

### Accreditation Process

Another effect of the accreditation process on Pathway 2 programs is a shift from a required number of didactic and supervised clinical practice hours to an outcomes-based assessment in the evaluation process. In CAAHEP-accredited programs, students are evaluated on their achievement of

**Table 2.** Commission on Accreditation of Allied Health Education Programs–Accredited Academic Lactation Programs.

Lactation program	Location
Birthway College of Midwifery	Portland, Oregon, USA
Drexel University, College of Nursing and Health Professions	Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Gillings School of Global Public Health	Chapel Hill, North Carolina, USA

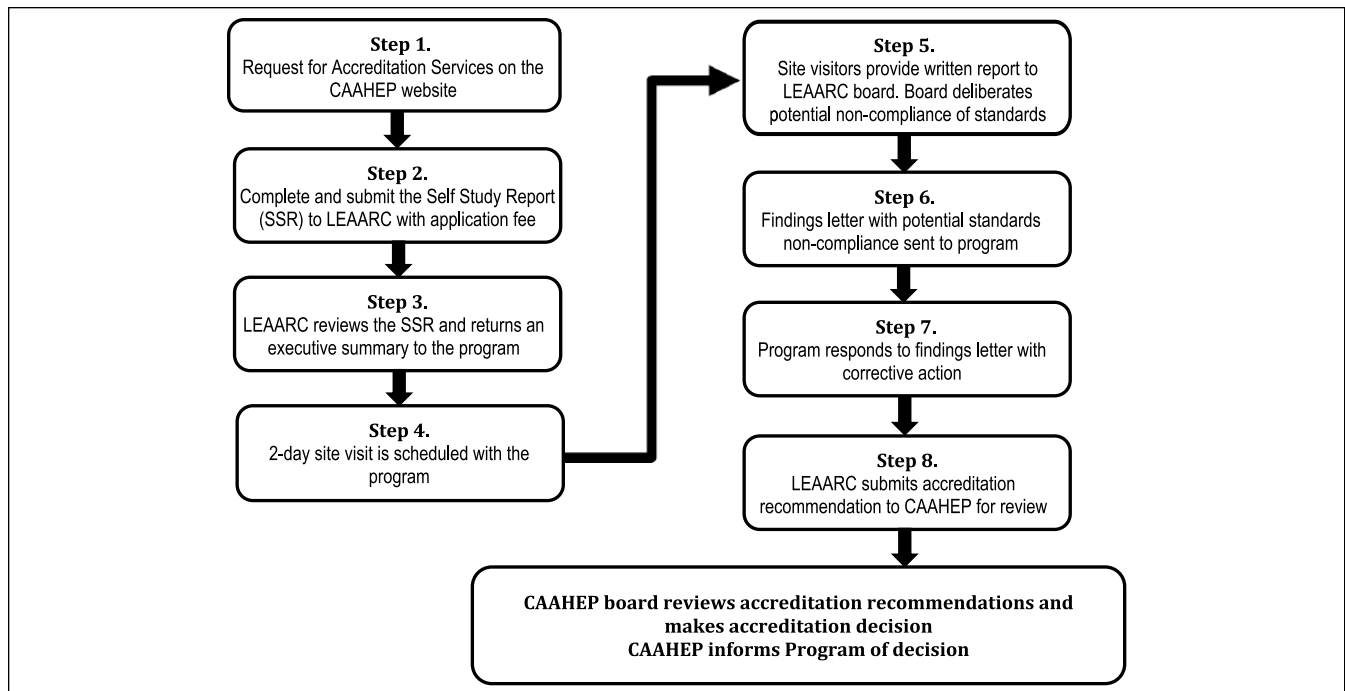
Note. List of accredited lactation programs is current as of March 2017. Information about each of these programs may be found at <http://www.caahep.org/Find-An-Accredited-Program/>.

core competencies, in theory and didactic courses, rather than focusing solely on the number of course credits and clinical hours. As a review committee for CAAHEP, LEAARC reviews Pathway 2 programs and makes recommendations to CAAHEP on accreditation of the programs. The *Standards and Guidelines for the Accreditation of Lactation Consultant Education Programs* required for Pathway 2 programs to qualify for CAAHEP accreditation include the following:

- The program must be taught in a postsecondary institution accredited by an institutional accrediting agency to provide a postsecondary program that awards a minimum of a certificate/diploma at the completion of the program.
- The program director must hold a minimum of a bachelor's degree (or equivalent) and have an appointment in the sponsor's academic institution.
- The clinical director (who may also serve as program director) must be an International Board Certified Lactation Consultant.
- Faculty for the lactation-specific didactic content and supervised clinical practice must be International Board Certified Lactation Consultants.
- The program must provide a broad base of support coursework to serve as a foundation for lactation consultant practice mapped to the LEAARC core curriculum.
- The clinical portion of the program must meet all core competencies for lactation consultant practice.

The full LEAARC Standards and Guidelines can be found at [http://www.leaarc.org/download/LEAARC\\_Standards\\_Guidelines.pdf](http://www.leaarc.org/download/LEAARC_Standards_Guidelines.pdf).

Figure 1 outlines the steps in the accreditation process. Programs first complete a rigorous Self-Study Report assessing every aspect of the program's administration. LEAARC reviews the Self-Study Report, sends an executive analysis summarizing findings and potential standards violations to the program director, and then conducts a site visit to meet with personnel at the institution and inspect program materials. Following the comprehensive program review, LEAARC



**Figure 1.** Accreditation process for lactation consultant education programs. CAAHEP = Commission on Accreditation of Allied Health Education Programs; LEAARC = Lactation Education Accreditation and Approval Review Committee. Adapted from Lactation Education Accreditation and Approval Review Committee (2015).

makes an accreditation recommendation to CAAHEP, and CAAHEP makes the final determination regarding accreditation. Full details of the accreditation process are available on the LEAARC website (<http://www.leaarc.org/accreditation.html>).

### Implications for International Programs

Achieving programmatic accreditation is a rigorous process. In the international arena, this may pose unique considerations. Logistical, structural, and financial challenges have been identified. Travel to distant geographic areas for reviewers, differences in higher education from country to country, and accrediting agency fees all contribute to these challenges. LEAARC is committed to matters of equity and continuous quality improvement and looks forward to working through these unique situations with international programs. A first step is increasing awareness in the global community regarding LEAARC's endorsement and accrediting activities. It is hoped that as awareness of these services and activities grows, interest from the international community will grow as well.

### Conclusion

As the lactation consultant profession has evolved, endorsement of lactation courses and accreditation of postsecondary lactation programs have become an intrinsic part of the discourse and activities of LEAARC. The lactation consultant profession has grown tremendously over the past three decades. As allied healthcare providers

with specialized lactation knowledge and skills, IBCLCs are integral to the safe, evidence-based, patient-centered, and effective provision of lactation care. As increasing numbers of potential certificants consider lactation practice as a profession, and as the scientific evidence base on human lactation continues to expand, standardization of education is paramount. Endorsement of lactation courses by LEAARC serves to assure the consumer that the courses have qualified faculty and cover essential topics and skills. Potential certificants come from a variety of backgrounds, making the standardization and integration of didactic education and clinical practice critically important for ensuring a competent lactation consultant workforce. Accreditation of lactation programs is a means to achieving this objective.

### Authors' Note

Elaine Webber is the Chair of LEAARC. Amanda L. Watkins is the Secretary of LEAARC.

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