

# Statement on Standards for Continuing Professional Education (CPE) Programs

The following standards are issued jointly by the AICPA and NASBA.

## Section 100

### *Preamble*

**01.** The right to use the title "Certified Public Accountant" (CPA) is regulated in the public interest and imposes a duty to maintain public confidence and current knowledge, skills, and abilities in all areas in which they provide services. CPAs must accept and fulfill their ethical responsibilities to the public and the profession regardless of their fields of employment.<sup>1</sup>

**02.** The profession of accountancy is characterized by an explosion of relevant knowledge, ongoing changes and expansion, and increasing complexity. Advancing technology, globalization of commerce, increasing specialization, proliferating regulations, and the complex nature of business transactions have created a dynamic environment that requires CPAs to continuously maintain and enhance their knowledge, skills, and abilities.

**03.** The continuing development of professional competence involves a program of lifelong educational activities. Continuing Professional Education (CPE) is the term used in these standards to describe the educational activities that assist CPAs in achieving and maintaining quality in professional services.

**04.** The following standards have been broadly stated in recognition of the diversity of practice and experience among CPAs. They establish a framework for the development, presentation, measurement, and reporting of CPE programs and thereby help to ensure that CPAs receive the quality CPE necessary to satisfy their obligations to serve the public interest.

## Section 200

### *Standards for CPAs*

#### General Standards

**01. Standard No. 1. All CPAs should participate in learning activities that maintain and/or improve their professional competence.**<sup>2</sup>

**02. Commentary.** Selection of learning activities should be a thoughtful, reflective process addressing the individual CPA's current and future professional plans, current knowledge and skills level, and desired or needed additional competence to meet future opportunities and/or professional responsibilities.

**03.** CPAs fields of employment do not limit the need for CPE. CPAs performing professional services need to have a broad range of knowledge, skills, and abilities. Thus, the concept of professional competence should be interpreted broadly. Accordingly, acceptable continuing education encompasses programs contributing to the development and maintenance of both technical and non-technical professional skills.

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<sup>1</sup> The term "CPAs" is used in these standards to identify all persons who are licensed and/or regulated by boards of accountancy.

<sup>2</sup> The terms "should" and "must" are intended to convey specific meanings within the context of this *Joint AICPA/NASBA Statement on Standards for Continuing Professional Education Programs*. The term "must" is used only in the standards applying to CPE program sponsors to convey that CPE program sponsors are not permitted any departure from those specific standards. The term "should" is used in the standards applying to both CPAs and CPE program sponsors and is intended to convey that CPAs and CPE program sponsors are expected to follow such standards as written and are required to justify any departures from such standards when unusual circumstances warrant such departures.

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**04.** Acceptable subjects include accounting, assurance/auditing, consulting services, specialized knowledge and applications, management, taxation, and ethics. Other subjects, including personal development, may also be acceptable if they maintain and/or improve the CPA's professional competence.

**05.** To help guide their professional development, CPAs may find it useful to develop a learning plan (see definition in Glossary.) The learning plan can be used to evaluate learning and professional competence development. It should be reviewed periodically and modified as professional competence needs change.

**06. Standard No. 2. CPAs should comply with all applicable CPE requirements and should claim CPE credit only for CPE programs when the CPE program sponsors have complied with the Standards for CPE Program Presentation (Nos. 8 - 11) and Standard for CPE Program Reporting No. 17.**

**07. Commentary.** CPAs are responsible for compliance with all applicable CPE requirements, rules, and regulations of state licensing bodies, other governmental entities, membership associations, and other professional organizations or bodies. CPAs should contact each appropriate entity to which they report to determine its specific requirements or any exceptions it may have to the standards presented herein.

**08.** Periodically, CPAs participate in learning activities which do not comply with all applicable CPE requirements, for example specialized industry programs offered through industry sponsors. If CPAs propose to claim credit for such learning activities, they should retain all relevant information regarding the program to provide documentation to state licensing bodies and/or all other professional organizations or bodies that the learning activity is equivalent to one which meets all these Standards.

**09. Standard No. 3. CPAs are responsible for accurate reporting of the appropriate number of CPE credits earned and should retain appropriate documentation of their participation in learning activities, including: (1) name and contact information of CPE program sponsor, (2) title and description of content, (3) date(s) of program, (4) location (if applicable), and (5) number of CPE credits, all of which should be included in documentation provided by the CPE program sponsor.**

**10. Commentary.** To protect the public interest, regulators require CPAs to document maintenance and enhancement of professional competence through periodic reporting of CPE. For convenience, measurement is expressed in CPE credits. However, the objective of CPE must always be maintenance/enhancement of professional competence, not attainment of credits. Compliance with regulatory and other requirements mandates that CPAs keep documentation of their participation in activities designed to maintain and/or improve professional competence. In the absence of legal or other requirements, a reasonable policy is to retain documentation for a minimum of five years from the end of the year in which the learning activities were completed.

**11.** Participants must document their claims of CPE credit. Examples of acceptable evidence of completion include:

- For group and independent study programs, a certificate or other verification supplied by the CPE program sponsor.
- For self-study programs, a certificate supplied by the CPE program sponsor after satisfactory completion of an examination.
- For instruction credit, a certificate or other verification supplied by the CPE program sponsor
- For a university or college course that is successfully completed for credit, a record or transcript of the grade the participant received.
- For university or college non-credit courses, a certificate of attendance issued by a representative of

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the university or college.

- For published articles, books, or CPE programs, (1) a copy of the publication (or in the case of a CPE program, course development documentation) that names the writer as author or contributor, (2) a statement from the writer supporting the number of CPE hours claimed, and (3) the name and contact information of the independent reviewer(s) or publisher.

**12. Standard No. 4. CPAs who complete sponsored learning activities that maintain or improve their professional competence should claim the CPE credits recommended by CPE program sponsors.**

**13. Commentary.** CPAs may participate in a variety of sponsored learning activities, such as workshops, seminars and conferences, self-study courses, Internet-based programs, and independent study. While CPE program sponsors determine credits, CPAs should claim credit only for activities through which they maintained or improved their professional competence. CPAs who participate in only part of a program should claim CPE credit only for the portion they attended or completed.

**14. Standard No. 5. CPAs may engage in independent study under the direction of a CPE program sponsor who has met the applicable standards for CPE program sponsors when the subject matter and level of study maintain or improve their professional competence.**

**15. Commentary.** Independent study is an educational process designed to permit a participant to learn a given subject under the guidance of a CPE program sponsor one-on-one. Participants in an independent study program should:

- Enter into a written learning contract with a CPE program sponsor who must comply with the applicable standards for CPE program sponsors.
- Accept the written recommendation of the CPE program sponsor as to the number of credits to be earned upon successful completion of the proposed learning activities. CPE credits will be awarded only if:
  1. All the requirements of the independent study as outlined in the learning contract are met,
  2. The CPE program sponsor reviews and signs the participant's report,
  3. The CPE program sponsor reports to the participant the actual credits earned, and
  4. The CPE program sponsor provides the participant with contact information.The credits to be recommended by an independent study CPE program sponsor should be agreed upon in advance and should be equated to the effort expended to improve professional competence. The credits cannot exceed the time devoted to the learning activities and may be less than the actual time involved.
- Retain the necessary documentation to satisfy regulatory requirements as to the content, inputs, and outcomes of the independent study.
- Complete the program of independent study in 15 weeks or less.

### **Section 300**

#### ***Standards for CPE Program Sponsors***

##### **General Standards**

**01. Standard No. 1. CPE program sponsors are responsible for compliance with all applicable standards and other CPE requirements.**

**02. Commentary.** CPE program sponsors may have to meet specific CPE requirements of state licensing bodies, other governmental entities, membership associations, and/or other professional organizations or bodies. Professional guidance for CPE program sponsors is available from the AICPA

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and NASBA; state-specific guidance is available from the state boards of accountancy. CPE program sponsors should contact the appropriate entity to determine requirements.

### **Standards for CPE Program Development**

**03. Standard No. 2. Sponsored learning activities must be based on relevant learning objectives and outcomes that clearly articulate the knowledge, skills, and abilities that can be achieved by participants in the learning activities.**

**04. Commentary.** Learning activities provided by CPE program sponsors for the benefit of CPAs should specify the level, content, and learning objectives so that potential participants can determine if the learning activities are appropriate to their professional competence development needs. Levels include, for example, basic, intermediate, advanced, update, and overview (see definitions in Glossary.)

**05. Standard No. 3. CPE program sponsors should develop and execute learning activities in a manner consistent with the prerequisite education, experience, and/or advance preparation of participants.**

**06. Commentary.** To the extent it is possible to do so, CPE program sponsors should make every attempt to equate program content and level with the backgrounds of intended participants. All programs must clearly identify prerequisite education, experience, and/or advance preparation, if any, in precise language so that potential participants can readily ascertain whether they qualify for the program.

**07. Standard No. 4. CPE program sponsors must use activities, materials, and delivery systems that are current, technically accurate, and effectively designed. CPE program sponsors must be qualified in the subject matter.**

**08. Commentary.** To best facilitate the learning process, sponsored programs and materials must be prepared, presented and updated timely. Learning activities must be developed by individuals or teams having expertise in the subject matter. Expertise may be demonstrated through practical experience or education.

**09.** CPE program sponsors must review the course materials periodically to assure that they are accurate and consistent with currently accepted standards relating to the program's subject matter.

**10. Standard No. 5. CPE program sponsors of group and self-study programs must ensure learning activities are reviewed by qualified persons other than those who developed them to assure that the program is technically accurate and current and addresses the stated learning objectives. These reviews must occur before the first presentation of these materials and again after each significant revision of the CPE programs.**

**11. Commentary.** Individuals or teams qualified in the subject matter must review programs. When it is impractical to review certain programs in advance, such as lectures given only once, greater reliance should be placed on the recognized professional competence of the instructors or presenters. Using independent reviewing organizations familiar with these standards may enhance quality assurance.

**12. Standard No. 6. CPE program sponsors of independent study learning activities must be qualified in the subject matter.**

**13. Commentary.** A CPE program sponsor of independent study learning activities must have expertise in the specific subject area related to the independent study. The CPE program sponsor must also:

- Review, evaluate, approve and sign the proposed independent study learning contract, including

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agreeing in advance on the number of credits to be recommended upon successful completion.

- Review and sign the written report developed by the participant in independent study.
- Retain the necessary documentation to satisfy regulatory requirements as to the content, inputs, and outcomes of the independent study.

**14. Standard No. 7. Self-study programs must employ learning methodologies that clearly define learning objectives, guide the participant through the learning process, and provide evidence of a participant's satisfactory completion of the program.**

**15. Commentary.** To guide participants through a learning process, CPE program sponsors of self-study programs must elicit participant responses to test for understanding of the material, offer evaluative feedback to incorrect responses, and provide reinforcement feedback to correct responses. To provide evidence of satisfactory completion of the course, CPE program sponsors of self-study programs must require participants to successfully complete a final examination with a minimum-passing grade of at least 70 percent before issuing CPE credit for the course. Examinations may contain questions of varying format, (for example, multiple-choice, essay and simulations.) If objective type questions are used, at least five questions per CPE credit must be included on the final examination. For example, the final examination for a five-credit course must include at least 25 questions.

**16.** Self-study programs must be based on materials specifically developed for instructional use. Self-study programs requiring only the reading of general professional literature, IRS publications, or reference manuals followed by a test will not be acceptable. However, the use of the publications and reference materials in self-study programs as supplements to the instructional materials could qualify if the self-study program complies with each of the CPE standards.

### **Standards for CPE Program Presentation**

**17. Standard No. 8. CPE program sponsors must provide descriptive materials that enable CPAs to assess the appropriateness of learning activities. To accomplish this, CPE program sponsors must inform participants in advance of:**

- Learning objectives.
- Prerequisites.
- Program level.
- Program content.
- Advance preparation.
- Instructional delivery methods.
- Recommended CPE credit.
- Course registration requirements.

**18. Commentary.** For potential participants to effectively plan their CPE, the program sponsor should disclose the significant features of the program in advance (e.g., through the use of brochures, Internet notices, invitations, direct mail, or other announcements). When CPE programs are offered in conjunction with noneducational activities, or when several CPE programs are offered concurrently, participants should receive an appropriate schedule of events indicating those components that are recommended for CPE credit. The CPE program sponsor's registration policies and procedures should be formalized, published, and made available to participants.

**19.** CPE program sponsors should distribute program materials timely and encourage participants to complete any advance preparation requirements. All programs should clearly identify prerequisite education, experience, and/or advance preparation requirements, if any, in the descriptive materials. Prerequisites should be written in precise language so that potential participants can readily ascertain whether they qualify for the program.

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**20. Standard No. 9. CPE program sponsors must ensure instructors are qualified with respect to both program content and instructional methods used.**

**21. Commentary.** Instructors are key ingredients in the learning process for any group program. Therefore, it is imperative that CPE program sponsors exercise great care in selecting qualified instructors for all group programs. Qualified instructors are those who are capable, through training, education, or experience of communicating effectively and providing an environment conducive to learning. They should be competent and current in the subject matter, skilled in the use of the appropriate instructional methods and technology, and prepared in advance.

**22.** CPE program sponsors should evaluate the instructor's performance at the conclusion of each program to determine the instructor's suitability to serve in the future.

**23. Standard No. 10. CPE program sponsors must employ an effective means for evaluating learning activity quality with respect to content and presentation, as well as provide a mechanism for participants to assess whether learning objectives were met.**

**24. Commentary.** The objectives of evaluation are to assess participant satisfaction with specific programs and to increase subsequent program effectiveness. Evaluations, whether written or electronic, should be solicited from participants and instructors for each program session, including self-study, to determine, among other things, whether:

- Stated learning objectives were met.
- If applicable, prerequisite requirements were appropriate.
- Program materials were accurate.
- Program materials were relevant and contributed to the achievement of the learning objectives.
- Time allotted to the learning activity was appropriate.
- If applicable, individual instructors were effective.
- Facilities and/or technological equipment was appropriate.
- Handout or advance preparation materials were satisfactory.
- Audio and video materials were effective.

**25.** CPE program sponsors should periodically review evaluation results to assess program effectiveness and should inform developers and instructors of evaluation results.

**26. Standard No. 11. CPE program sponsors must ensure instructional methods employed are appropriate for the learning activities. Learning activities should be presented in a manner consistent with the descriptive and technical materials provided.**

**27. Commentary.** CPE program sponsors should evaluate the instructional methods employed for the learning activities to determine if the delivery is appropriate and effective. Integral aspects in the learning environment that should be carefully monitored include the number of participants and the facilities and technologies employed in the delivery of the learning activity.

**28.** CPE program sponsors are expected to present learning activities that comply with course descriptions and objectives. Appropriate supplemental materials may also be used.

### **Standards for CPE Program Measurement**

**29. Standard No. 12. Sponsored learning activities are measured by program length, with one 50-minute period equal to one CPE credit. One-half CPE credit increments (equal to 25 minutes) are permitted after the first credit has been earned in a given learning activity.**

**30. Commentary.** For learning activities in which individual segments are less than 50 minutes, the

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sum of the segments should be considered one total program. For example, five 30-minute presentations would equal 150 minutes and should be counted as three CPE credits. When the total minutes of a sponsored learning activity are greater than 50, but not equally divisible by 50, the CPE credits granted should be rounded down to the nearest one-half credit. Thus, learning activities with segments totaling 140 minutes should be granted two and one-half CPE credits.

**31.** While it is the participant's responsibility to report the appropriate number of credits earned, CPE program sponsors must monitor group learning activities to assign the correct number of CPE credits.

**32.** For university or college credit courses that meet these CPE Standards, each unit of college credit shall equal the following CPE credits:

- Semester System 15 credits
- Quarter System 10 credits

**33.** For university or college non-credit courses that meet these CPE standards, CPE credits shall be awarded only for the actual classroom time spent in the non-credit course.

**34.** Credit is not granted to participants for preparation time.

**35.** Only the portions of committee or staff meetings that are designed as programs of learning and comply with these standards qualify for CPE credit.

**36. Standard No. 13. CPE credit for self-study learning activities must be based on a pilot test of the average completion time.**

**37. Commentary.** A sample of intended professional participants should be selected to test program materials in an environment and manner similar to that in which the program is to be presented. The sample group of at least three individuals must be independent of the program development group and possess the appropriate level of knowledge before taking the program. The sample does not have to ensure statistical validity. CPE credits should be recommended based on the average completion time for the sample. If substantive changes are subsequently made to program materials further pilot tests of the revised program materials should be conducted to affirm or amend, as appropriate, the average completion time.

**38. Standard No. 14. Instructors or discussion leaders of learning activities should receive CPE credit for both their preparation and presentation time to the extent the activities maintain or improve their professional competence and meet the requirements of these CPE standards.**

**39. Commentary.** Instructors, discussion leaders, or speakers who present a learning activity for the first time should receive CPE credit for actual preparation time up to two times the number of CPE credits to which participants would be entitled, in addition to the time for presentation. For example, for learning activities in which participants could receive 8 CPE credits, instructors may receive up to 24 CPE credits (16 for preparation plus 8 for presentation). For repeat presentations, CPE credit can be claimed only if it can be demonstrated that the learning activity content was substantially changed and such change required significant additional study or research.

**40. Standard No. 15. Writers of published articles, books, or CPE programs should receive CPE credit for their research and writing time to the extent it maintains or improves their professional competence.**

**41. Commentary.** Writing articles, books, or CPE programs for publication is a structured activity that involves a process of learning. For the writer to receive CPE credit, the article, book, or CPE program must be formally reviewed by an independent party. CPE credits should be claimed only upon

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publication.

**42. Standard No. 16. CPE credits recommended by a CPE program sponsor of independent study must not exceed the time the participant devoted to complete the learning activities specified in the learning contract.**

**43. Commentary.** The credits to be recommended by an independent study CPE program sponsor should be agreed upon in advance and should be equated to the effort expended to improve professional competence. The credits cannot exceed the time devoted to the learning activities and may be less than the actual time involved.

### **Standards for CPE Program Reporting**

**44. Standard No. 17. CPE program sponsors must provide program participants with documentation of their participation, which includes the following:**

- **CPE program sponsor name and contact information.**
- **Participant's name.**
- **Course title.**
- **Course field of study.**
- **Date offered or completed.**
- **If applicable, location.**
- **Type of instructional/delivery method used.**
- **Amount of CPE credit recommended.**
- **Verification by CPE program sponsor representative.**

**45. Commentary.** CPE program sponsors should provide participants with documentation to support their claims of CPE credit. Acceptable evidence of completion includes:

- For group and independent study programs, a certificate or other verification supplied by the CPE program sponsor.
- For self-study programs, a certificate supplied by the CPE program sponsor after satisfactory completion of an examination.
- For instruction credit, a certificate or other verification supplied by the CPE program sponsor
- For a university or college course that is successfully completed for credit, a record or transcript of the grade the participant received.
- For university or college non-credit courses, a certificate of attendance issued by a representative of the university or college.
- For published articles, books, or CPE programs, (1) a copy of the publication (or in the case of a CPE program, course development documentation) that names the writer as author or contributor, (2) a statement from the writer supporting the number of CPE hours claimed, and (3) the name and contact information of the independent reviewer(s) or publisher.

**46. Standard No. 18. CPE program sponsors must retain adequate documentation for five years to support their compliance with these standards and the reports that may be required of participants.**

**47. Commentary.** Evidence of compliance with responsibilities set forth under these Standards which is to be retained by CPE program sponsors includes, but is not limited to:

- Records of participation.
- Dates and locations.
- Instructor names and credentials.
- Number of CPE credits earned by participants.
- Results of program evaluations.

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Information to be retained by developers includes copies of program materials, evidence that the program materials were developed and reviewed by qualified parties, and a record of how CPE credits were determined.

**48.** For CPE program sponsors offering self-study programs, appropriate pilot test records must be retained regarding the following:

- When the pilot test was conducted.
- The intended participant population.
- How the sample was determined.
- Names and profiles of sample participants.
- A summary of participants' actual completion time.

### Section 400

### *Glossary*

**01. Advanced.** Learning activity level most useful for individuals with mastery of the particular topic. This level focuses on the development of in-depth knowledge, a variety of skills, or a broader range of applications. Advanced level programs are often appropriate for seasoned professionals within organizations; however, they may also be beneficial for other professionals with specialized knowledge in a subject area

**02. Basic.** Learning activity level most beneficial to CPAs new to a skill or an attribute. These individuals are often at the staff or entry level in organizations, although such programs may also benefit a seasoned professional with limited exposure to the area.

**03. Continuing Professional Education (CPE).** An integral part of the lifelong learning required to provide competent service to the public. The set of activities that enables CPAs to maintain and improve their professional competence.

**04. CPE credit.** Fifty minutes of participation in a group, independent study or self-study program. One-half CPE credit increments (equal to 25 minutes) are permitted after the first credit has been earned in a given learning activity.

**05. CPE program sponsor.** The individual or organization responsible for setting learning objectives, developing the program materials to achieve such objectives, offering a program to participants, and maintaining the documentation required by these standards. The term CPE program sponsor may include associations of CPAs, whether formal or informal, as well as employers who offer in-house programs.

**06. Evaluative feedback.** Specific response to incorrect answers to questions in self-study programs. Unique feedback must be provided for each incorrect response, as each one is likely to be wrong for differing reasons.

**07. Group program.** An educational process designed to permit a participant to learn a given subject through interaction with an instructor and other participants either in a classroom or conference setting or by using the Internet.

**08. Independent study.** An educational process designed to permit a participant to learn a given subject under a learning contract with a CPE program sponsor.

**09. Instructional methods.** Delivery strategies such as case studies, computer-assisted learning,

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lectures, group participation, programmed instruction, teleconferencing, use of audiovisual aids, or work groups employed in group, self-study, or independent study programs.

**10. Intermediate.** Learning activity level that builds on a basic program, most appropriate for CPAs with detailed knowledge in an area. Such persons are often at a mid-level within the organization, with operational and/or supervisory responsibilities.

**11 Internet-based programs.** A learning activity, through a group program (Paragraph .07 above) or a self-study program (Paragraph .22 following), that is designed to permit a participant to learn the given subject matter via the Internet. To qualify as either a group or self-study program, the Internet learning activity must meet the respective standards.

**12. Learning activity.** An educational endeavor that maintains or improves professional competence.

**13. Learning contract.** A written contract signed by an independent study participant and a qualified CPE program sponsor prior to the commencement of the independent study that:

1. Specifies the nature of the independent study program and the time frame over which it is to be completed, not to exceed 15 weeks.
2. Specifies that the output must be in the form of a written report that will be reviewed by the CPE program sponsor or a qualified person selected by the CPE program sponsor.
3. Outlines the maximum CPE credit that will be awarded for the independent study program, but limits credit to actual time spent.

**14. Learning objectives.** Specifications on what participants should accomplish in a learning activity. Learning objectives are useful to program developers in deciding appropriate instructional methods and allocating time to various subjects.

**15. Learning plans.** Structured processes that help CPAs guide their professional development. They are dynamic instruments used to evaluate and document learning and professional competence development. This may be reviewed regularly and modified, as CPAs' professional competence needs change. Plans include:

- A self-assessment of the gap between current and needed knowledge, skills, and abilities;
- A set of learning objectives arising from this assessment; and
- Learning activities to be undertaken to fulfill the learning plan.

**16 Overview.** Learning activity level that provides a general review of a subject area from a broad perspective. These programs may be appropriate for professionals at all organizational levels.

**17. Personal development.** A field of study that covers such skills as communications, managing the group process, dealing effectively with others, interviewing, counseling, and career planning.

**18. Pilot test.** Sampling of at least three independent individuals representative of the intended participants to measure the average completion time to determine the recommended CPE credit for self-study programs.

**19. Professional competence.** Having requisite knowledge, skills, and abilities to provide quality services as defined by the technical and ethical standards of the profession. The expertise needed to undertake professional responsibilities and to serve the public interest.

**20. Program of learning.** A collection of learning activities that are designed and intended as continuing education and that comply with these standards.

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- 21. Reinforcement feedback.** Specific responses to correct answers to questions in self-study programs. Such feedback restates why the answer selected was correct.
- 22. Self-study program.** An educational process designed to permit a participant to learn a given subject without major involvement of an instructor. Self-study programs use a pilot test to measure the average completion time from which the recommended CPE credit is determined.
- 23. Update.** Learning activity level that provides a general review of new developments. This level is for participants with a background in the subject area who desire to keep current.

Effective Dates:

Unless otherwise established by state licensing bodies and/or other professional organizations, these Standards are to be effective as follows:

1. For CPAs, group programs and independent study -- January 1, 2002.
2. For self-study courses being published for the first time after December 31, 2002 -- upon publication.
3. For self-study courses already in existence as of December 31, 2002 -- January 1, 2004.