OVERVIEW

Yoga Alliance has served as the primary registry and standards-setting organization for yoga teachers and schools worldwide since 1999.

In 2013, Yoga Alliance created Social Credentialing, an innovative system that blends the best practices of social ratings websites and traditional credentialing processes. The decision to adopt this new system reflected the longstanding desire of the yoga community to increase the rigor and oversight of our credentialing system while protecting the diversity in yoga formats and styles.

As interest in yoga continues to rise, Yoga Alliance has a special responsibility to the public to meet the demand for meaningful credentials that promote safe and competent yoga teaching.

After exploring a variety of existing credentialing models, Yoga Alliance developed Social Credentialing because it adds a layer of oversight and accountability for teacher-training programs, and provides them with real-time feedback from their students. It also allowed us to maintain low registration fees while utilizing the foundation of our existing registry.

This article explains the context and decision-making process that led to Social Credentialing, as well as the fundamentals of how this new system works.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Yoga teaching is difficult to credential, but society demands standards.
- Yoga Alliance initially chose a registry to support diversity in yoga.
- Yoga Alliance developed Social Credentialing because traditional credentialing options were unable to balance diversity and oversight as effectively as this new system.
- Social Credentialing enables Yoga Alliance to provide verified, objective oversight of our registered schools while protecting the yoga community from for-profit social-ratings sites.
Yoga is about the union of **mind, body and spirit**, and cultivating intuition and awareness of the intangible.

**YOGA TEACHING IS NOT EASY TO CREDENTIAL**

Yoga is a complex, personal and multifaceted practice with a seemingly infinite variety of lineages and styles, and is intended to be adapted to the evolving needs of each student. Building a credential requires the development of standards that must be applied uniformly regardless of stylistic or individual differences.

Yoga doesn’t easily fit the testing, rule-making culture that modern credentialing systems tend to represent. Yoga is about the union of mind, body and spirit, and cultivating intuition and awareness of the intangible. Credentialing is about separating, measuring, and analyzing processes and outcomes. So it is challenging to set standards and develop a credential for the teaching of a practice like yoga that defies easy categorization and universal methods.

**THE PUBLIC DEMANDS STANDARDS**

So why set standards and adopt credentials for such a personal practice? The simple answer is the public wants the confidence and security that credentials help to encourage. That demand is manifested in the broad range of credentials that support thousands of different industries and professions.

The teaching of yoga is not immune to this collective desire. Whether it’s a human resources manager interested in hiring a yoga teacher to work at his gym or corporate office, or a yoga practitioner considering whether to take classes at a local studio, people generally expect their yoga teachers to bear credentials that attest to their levels of training and experience. There is a difference between the qualifications of a yoga teacher who has taken a weekend course and one who has completed a 200-hour teacher-training program from a Registered Yoga School (RYS). Credentials make those differences visible to the public.
Members of the yoga community generally understand the need for standards. They are interested in nurturing the growth of a practice they love.

When the founders of Yoga Alliance began to develop a credentialing system in the late 1990s, they were responding in part to the growing likelihood that if the yoga community didn’t set their own standards, the government would do it for them. The founders were also addressing a specific need expressed by hospital administrators to determine which teachers were qualified to teach yoga to their patients.

Members of the yoga community generally understand the need for standards. They are interested in nurturing the growth of a practice they love, and they understand the negative impact that poorly trained teachers can have on the community. One or two bad experiences at a yoga studio can turn someone away from yoga forever, and setting minimum educational standards for yoga teacher training programs helps to reduce the frequency of such occurrences.

**THE GROWTH OF YOGA LED TO AN INCREASED DEMAND FOR YOGA TEACHERS**

Instructors now teach yoga to millions of people on a daily basis. The “Yoga in America” study issued by Yoga Journal in 2012 reported that 20.4 million American adults (8.7 percent of all U.S. adults) practiced yoga, an increase of over 22 percent from four years earlier. In addition, 104.4 million adults (44.4 percent of the population) indicated they were interested in trying yoga, a startling increase of 470 percent from 2008. So yoga is now widely practiced in the U.S., and the rate of growth in practitioners is clearly picking up steam.

**Interest in Yoga**

- Number of U.S. Non-Practitioners Interested in Yoga
- Number of U.S. Yoga Practitioners

Practitioners also nearly doubled their spending on yoga classes and products between 2008 and 2012, from $5.7 billion to $10.3 billion annually.

The substantial increase in yoga practitioners has created a growing demand for yoga teachers. That demand has naturally led to a vast expansion in the number of yoga teachers, as well as a huge increase in the number of practitioners interested in participating in teacher-training programs and yoga businesses incorporating such programs into the line of services they offer. In fact, the number of teachers registered with Yoga Alliance has quadrupled in the last eight years, while the number of schools registered with us has expanded almost 900 percent. Applications for new Registered Yoga Teachers (RYT) now average over 1,500 per month, and Registered Yoga School (RYS) applications are submitted at an average monthly rate of over 150, raising new operational challenges for Yoga Alliance and eliminating the potential for centralized oversight.
Diversity, not oversight, was the primary consideration of Yoga Alliance’s founders in the late 90’s.

YOGA ALLIANCE’S FOUNDERS CHOSE A REGISTRY TO SUPPORT DIVERSITY IN YOGA

In setting standards for such a large number of yoga schools and teachers, Yoga Alliance grapples with this fundamental challenge: how is it possible to maintain a credentialing system that respects the freedom and diversity of thought and style inherent in yoga while also providing oversight and fostering accountability among credentialed schools and teachers?

Diversity, not oversight, was the primary consideration of Yoga Alliance’s founders in the late 90’s. There were many different philosophies and styles represented at the table when yoga standards were first being considered, and no one wanted to create a rigid credentialing system or bureaucratic organization that would dictate how yoga was taught.

In 1999, the founders decided a curriculum-based registry was the best way to achieve balance between diversity and compliance. So they created minimum curriculum Standards for 200-hour and 500-hour teacher-training programs. They also developed a registry for schools agreeing to adopt and uphold those Standards and for teachers who completed their training with a registered school.
As the popularity of yoga grew and tens of thousands of teachers registered with our organization, Yoga Alliance realized that it was vital to attend to the long-neglected needs for **oversight and accountability**.

While a traditional registry does a great job of respecting diversity, it is also the least rigorous of all the traditional voluntary credentialing systems. In the broadest sense, here’s how Yoga Alliance’s registry, in its original incarnation, compared to other traditional processes by which credentialing organizations grant individuals or groups a time-limited recognition after verifying they have met predetermined and standardized criteria (see chart below).

So historically, we built our traditional registry on promises to uphold standards — promises that, until recently, Yoga Alliance hasn’t had the means to verify. Over time, that lack of verification became an ever-more-pressing concern within the yoga community. As the popularity of yoga grew and tens of thousands of teachers registered with our organization, Yoga Alliance realized that it was vital to attend to the long-neglected needs for oversight and accountability.

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<th>REGISTRY</th>
<th>CERTIFICATION</th>
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<td>Under the Yoga Alliance Registry, yoga schools agree to maintain a curriculum that meets minimum Standards in order to become a Registered Yoga Schools (RYS). Prospective teachers who complete a RYS program are automatically eligible to become Registered Yoga Teachers (RYT).</td>
<td>Certifications are generally issued to individuals. This type of credential typically requires an individual to pass a test or tests (e.g., written and/or performance) demonstrating a minimum level of knowledge and competence to be certified as a yoga teacher.</td>
<td>Accreditations are generally issued to organizations, and often involve a physical audit. In the yoga teacher-training context, an accreditation might periodically subject yoga schools to audits to ensure they continue to meet minimum qualitative standards for delivering effective training.</td>
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EVALUATING TRADITIONAL CREDENTIALING OPTIONS

Faced with these challenges, in 2012 we began to consider our options. As we explored the potential of traditional credentialing solutions, we learned:

Traditional credentials have their own shortcomings and provide only limited oversight and accountability. Assessing an individual’s knowledge or skills via testing does not reliably indicate long-term conceptual retention, potential work performance, or ability to assimilate and apply knowledge on the job. Likewise, reviewing an organization’s teaching conditions and processes via an audit provides a limited picture of the quality and effectiveness of its training program. Auditing only a portion of a school’s training does not account for the full arc of a student’s experience, both in and out of the classroom.

Traditional credentials are generally more expensive. Since they involve in-person testing or physical audits, a certification or accreditation system would be more expensive to operate than our current registry and would require higher registrant and member fees to maintain. In addition, creating a certification or accreditation would require several years of costly market research to assess their validity, and that expense would have to be recaptured through additional fees.

A new, traditional credential wouldn’t improve the foundation of our existing credentialing system: the registry RYTss and RYSs have been part of for 15 years. It wouldn’t improve the registry because it would constitute an entirely new, separate credentialing product. It would also likely diminish the focus on the registry. It could even undermine it and invalidate the investment that tens of thousands of current RYTss made in securing our existing credentials, and create havoc in the yoga studios and nonprofit organizations that operate RYSs.
Our goal is to add **oversight and accountability** to the registry.

**SAYING NO TO THE “YOGA POLICE”**

As we considered these challenges, we also asked how we could add rigor and accountability to our registry without having to deputize a “Yoga Police” force to investigate our schools and teachers operating in more than 135 different countries and territories. From a practical standpoint, we considered who would be in the best position to determine whether our RYSs are upholding their promise to meet our curriculum and trainer Standards. The obvious answer was the students who are the clients of those schools. When asked specific questions designed to promote objectivity, students can tell us about their schools’ curriculum and trainers, and provide feedback on the quality of the training they receive. Traditional credentialing models aren’t designed to capture qualitative information of this nature.

When Yoga Alliance was founded, this type of feedback system was neither technically feasible nor culturally acceptable. However, the development of online social-ratings systems has enabled us to begin building a transparent system of feedback and accountability by empowering students to provide oversight of the yoga schools that provide their training.

That is how our new Social Credentialing system was born.

**HOW SOCIAL CREDENTIALING WORKS**

Social Credentialing was built on the foundation of our traditional registry, so it has the advantage of preserving the infrastructure of our existing credentialing system and maintaining faith with the tens of thousands of teachers and schools that had invested in it. Our goal is to add oversight and accountability to the registry by implementing a system that empowers verified students to provide factual, non-anonymous, systematic feedback about the RYSs they attend.

Applicant schools have always been required to document that their curriculum and trainers meet our Standards. In the past, that happened only during the application process. Now, however, schools are required to post their syllabus and the names of their lead trainers on our website so their students can review the information to provide ongoing, quantitative feedback about whether they continue to meet our Standards.

We are also encouraging RYSs to articulate the learning objectives they seek to achieve. Those objectives are posted on our website and visible to the public along with the syllabus. When schools think through and articulate those objectives, their teacher-training programs are more likely to meet them. In addition, students searching for the ideal
More than 18,000 registering yoga teachers have reviewed the RYSs from which they received their training.

yoga school at which to continue their yoga journeys are more likely to invest their time and money in RYSs that transparently share information about their programs’ goals and content.

When students apply to register with Yoga Alliance after completing a RYS training, we now require them to complete a review of their school, which entails rating and commenting on how well it satisfies the following Standards-related criteria:

- How closely does the syllabus you were taught correspond to the one the RYS filed with us?²
- Are the lead trainers who taught you the same individuals the school registered with the program, and did they teach the required minimum number of hours?
- Do you feel prepared to begin teaching the principles and techniques of yoga safely and competently?³
- How likely would you be to recommend the school to a friend or colleague?

We completed the initial transition to our new Social Credentialing model on December 4, 2013. Since then, more than 18,000 registering yoga teachers have reviewed the RYSs from which they received their training. We’re still in the initial stages of implementing the system, and we have a lot to learn to maximize its effectiveness. Yet there is no doubt that Yoga Alliance and the yoga community now have a much clearer picture of what is happening at our RYSs than we ever had in the 14 years before the introduction of Social Credentialing. That will help us to increase the rigor of our credentials and provide more credibility for the yoga community.

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³ Copyright 2014 by Yoga Alliance and Yoga Alliance Registry. All rights reserved. All material presented in this publication, written or otherwise, may not be redistributed, rebroadcasted or shared without the express written consent of Yoga Alliance and/or Yoga Alliance Registry.
We **uphold responsibility** by operating a system different than those other social-rating websites in several significant respects.

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### YOGA ALLIANCE HAS A RESPONSIBILITY TO AVOID UNVERIFIED, EXCESSIVELY SUBJECTIVE RATINGS

At first glance, some may confuse Social Credentialing with social-ratings websites like Yelp, but that comparison is superficial. We are a nonprofit credentialing and membership organization, not a for-profit social-ratings business. We have a special responsibility to our registrants and members and to the public to avoid the unverified, excessively subjective, and sometimes corrupt or inflammatory ratings and comments that consumer-oriented ratings sites often deliver.

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<th>Low Fees</th>
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<th>School Accreditation</th>
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Eliminating anonymity encourages civility and constructive behavior.

- **The individuals who review our RYSs are verified.** We know they were actual students who completed the teacher-training programs they are reviewing.

- **There is no anonymity,** so the students who review our RYSs are accountable for what they say. Eliminating anonymity encourages civility and constructive behavior while reducing the emotional component of the feedback.

- **Reviewers have extensive experience with their school.** RYS 200 students, for example, have spent a minimum of 180 hours of in-person learning with their teacher-training program faculty, which is far more time than the average consumer spends experiencing a service or product before reviewing it on a typical social-ratings site.

- **Our survey encourages objectivity** by seeking feedback grounded in fact, such as whether the RYS teaches content matching the syllabus it filed with Yoga Alliance, and whether the lead trainers were the same individuals who were verified by Yoga Alliance, and whether they taught the minimum number of hours required by our Standards.

- **Social Credentialing provides systematic feedback** to help RYSs improve their training. All registering students are required to participate, eliminating the selection bias that afflicts random surveys administered by for-profit social-ratings sites. Every respondent is asked the same series of questions, and that provides a consistent baseline for comparison. We have also included an option enabling RYSs to add three additional review questions of their own, to help them receive useful and specific feedback about their training programs.
Yoga Alliance’s mission and sole motivation is to serve the public and protect the interests of the yoga community while maintaining the integrity of the teaching and practice of yoga.

PROTECTING YOGA FROM THE INTRUSION OF FOR-PROFIT SOCIAL-RATINGS SITES

Our embrace of Social Credentialing recognizes that people are increasingly turning to the Internet to research professional services and vendors, and to benefit from the advice and experience of others. This trend is growing dramatically, and it is especially pronounced among younger generations that have grown up in a wired world. As consumers increasingly place their trust in the online recommendations of others, it will inevitably promote the businesses of companies like Yelp and Google, and diminish the need for traditional credentials and credentialing organizations, which are also in the business of advising consumers.

Consumers are already reviewing yoga studios and individual teachers on platforms provided by Yelp, Yahoo, Google, etc. These for-profit, publicly traded corporations’ business models put their bottom line before the best interests of yoga or the individuals earning a living by teaching it. By contrast, Yoga Alliance’s mission and sole motivation is to serve the public and protect the interests of the yoga community while maintaining the integrity of the teaching and practice of yoga.

SOCIAL CREDENTIALING

> Verified reviewers
> Encourages objectivity
> Provides systematic feedback
> Allows businesses to add their own questions
> Developed for the yoga community

SOCIAL RATING SITES

> Provides businesses with customer feedback
> Helps potential customers make more informed choices
> Allows anonymity and the potential for fraudulent reviews
> Suffers from selection bias, (i.e. extreme reactions to a business prompt most reviews)
> Developed with a for-profit motive
Although Yoga Alliance was originally incorporated as a single legal entity, it now consists of two separate but related organizations: Yoga Alliance Registry, a 501(c)(3) public charity, and Yoga Alliance, a 501(c)(6) trade and professional association. These two, nonprofit organizations complement each other in promoting public awareness of the benefits of yoga. Registered Yoga Schools (RYSs) and Registered Yoga Teachers (RYTs) are registered with Yoga Alliance Registry. Member benefits and services are provided through Yoga Alliance. In recognition of the complementary roles of these organizations, and for the sake of simplicity, we use the name “Yoga Alliance” throughout this document to refer to both organizations.

During the transition period from our old model to our new Social Credentialing system, the syllabus question is posed only to those students whose Registered Yoga Schools have posted their syllabus.

This is the form the question takes for students who complete a RYS 200 program. Students who complete a RYS 300 or RYS 500 are asked: Do you feel “prepared to teach principles and techniques of yoga that are more advanced, and to teach with greater skill, than could reasonably be expected of a RYT 200?” There are different questions for Registered Prenatal Yoga Teachers (RPYT) and Registered Childrens Yoga Teachers (RCYT) candidates as well.

We intend to continue to improve the system to promote safe and competent yoga teaching and enhanced credibility. Consequently, we have a responsibility to provide a meaningful alternative to the unverified, subjective, and sometimes corrupt or inflammatory ratings and comments the consumer sites deliver. We also want to protect our RYT and RYSs, while providing the public with a reliable, fair and contextual source for information and advice when they are seeking a yoga teacher or school.

Our Social Credentialing system is designed to measure quality in a way that traditional credentialing cannot; to provide the RYS community with systematic feedback to help them improve their training programs; and to provide potential yoga students with useful and objective information to make informed choices. Working with our Standards Committee and Board of Directors, together with feedback from the yoga community, we intend to continue to improve the system to promote safe and competent yoga teaching and enhanced credibility for our registrants and members and the entire community.

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