Discussion on Opening ATA’s Exam to Nonmembers

The November–December issue included an announcement that the Board voted to postpone a decision to open ATA’s certification exam to nonmembers. This was followed by the answers to some frequently asked questions concerning the issues involved (http://bit.ly/FAQ-Decoupling). Here are some responses we received after members were encouraged to submit their feedback.

But don’t let the conversation stop here! As an ATA member, your voice is important, so please send your comments. The next issue will feature an argument in favor of opening the exam. Stay tuned!

Facts and Opinions on Decoupling ATA’s Certification Exam from Membership

By Robert Sette, CT
ATA-certified (French>English, Italian>English, Portuguese>English, and Spanish>English)
Denver, Colorado

ATA’s certification exam has always been a valuable membership right that is proudly held by many ATA members, and it has greatly benefited members and the Association. Last August, ATA’s Board of Directors postponed its decision to decouple the Certified Translator (CT) credential from ATA membership to January 1, 2021. Based on significant member input, the Board has prepared a Bylaws amendment to be presented to ATA Voting members at our 61st Annual Conference in Boston, Massachusetts (October 21–24, 2020).

That amendment, if passed, will effectively remove from the Bylaws the right of ATA members to take ATA’s certification exam and to hold the CT credential, making it possible for any individual in the U.S. or abroad to take the exam, and upon passing, to be “ATA-certified” without being an ATA member.

As the ATA 61st Annual Conference in Boston approaches, all Voting members of the Association must thoughtfully consider whether we should relinquish this right as members and remove it from our Bylaws.

BACKGROUND: THE HAMM REPORT

In 2000, association executive and certification consultant Michael Hamm...
delivered a report to ATA's Board. In that report, he mentioned the possibility of separating ATA's credential from a membership requirement. He also mentioned that the most well-respected credentials are administered by an independent body, not a membership association.

In the end, he made nine specific recommendations designated “A” through “I.” Not one of those recommendations specifically mentions decoupling certification from membership. Recommendations “A” and “B,” however, are significant. They refer to first conducting a strategic planning process (which never occurred), and second, establishing a formal body to govern “all credentials offered by the Association.”

(This independent body was never created.) Neither the independent body nor a strategic planning process were even mentioned in the summary ATA prepared and posted on its website in 2001, entitled “Executive Summary.” For many years (apparently until early 2018, when former ATA Director and Treasurer Gabe Bokor made it available on his website), the report was deemed confidential, and that highly edited “summary” was what was available to the membership. The full Hamm report seems to have only been made available on ATA's website in mid-2019.

CREDIBILITY OF OUR CREDENTIAL

The prime justification that ATA has stated for decoupling certification is to “enhance the credibility” of our credential. Unfortunately, there is no current, specific, or validated evidence that decoupling would serve this purpose. Yes, Michael Hamm says that membership-based credentials “typically have less credibility and impact in an industry/profession... than freestanding national professional certifications,” but he goes on to say that “some freestanding national professional certifications have easier testing requirements” than ATA’s credential at the time of his report, 20 years ago, in 1999–2000. Hamm did not qualify ATA certification (then referred to as “accreditation”) in a negative light.

In fact, it was then-ATA President Ann Macfarlane who, in reference to ATA’s credential, stated that “in the world of voluntary certifications, a member-based credential may be perceived as a second-rate credential” (emphasis added). Hamm made no such assertion.

There is no logical link between separating our credential from Association membership and enhancing its stature. Nonmember certified translators would not have any vested interest in promoting ATA, attending its functions, or contributing as speakers, writers, or mentors. The difficulty of verifying fulfillment of continuing education requirements would certainly increase, and that would most definitely not enhance the credibility of our credential.

If the overall aim of ATA's Board is to enhance the recognition of our credential, then there are various concrete steps that can be taken to do so.

In a nonmember certified translator scenario, the enforcement of ethics matters, once adjudicated, would have no “teeth,” and an individual would be free to claim ATA certification without fear of sanctions being levied, other than removal from ATA's list of certified members. Even now, with the available sanction of suspending membership, it's difficult and time-consuming for ATA Headquarters staff to pursue individuals who fraudulently claim ATA certified status.

The bottom line with regard to credibility is this: ATA certification is already one of the top translator credentials in the world. It’s well-respected by professionals, educators, and clients, and even by Michael Hamm. There is no evidence of other credentials that have soared in stature simply because of removal of an association membership requirement.

FINANCES

The Bylaws amendment to be presented to the membership later this year, as passed by the Board at the 2019 ATA Annual Conference in Palm Springs, states in part: [...] Whereas allowing nonmembers to take the ATA certification exam is expected to increase market demand for the exam, resulting in additional revenue to the Association [...] This statement cannot be supported. ATA has not determined the nonmember pricing for the exam or for maintaining certification. Additionally, ATA's Board has stated that there is only "anecdotal" evidence of nonmembers wanting to take the exam. No market research has been done. No survey of the membership asking how many certified translators would remain if they did not have to maintain ATA membership. With stated per-exam expenses of $500 to $600 and a current member exam fee of $525, any claimed additional revenue would be minimal. The net result would even likely be negative, based on the increase in administrative work at ATA Headquarters required by any substantial increase in exam numbers, and any decline in membership dues revenue from members who choose to leave while maintaining their certification.

Additionally, in ATA's fiscal year ending June 30, 2019, a loss of approximately $170K was recorded. Although it has been stated that the Association is still financially healthy, this is not the time to upset our financial apple cart with all of these unknowns, and the claim of “additional revenue” is aspirational at best. In fact, if the Association were to record a loss in the current fiscal year, as is predicted to happen, that would violate the pre-conditions for decoupling established by ATA's Board.

IS RESTRICTION OF TRADE AN ISSUE?

One rationale proposed by ATA for decoupling is the concern that nonmembers may file lawsuits, claiming that they are restricted from working as a translator by the requirement to join ATA to sit for our exam. There are two aspects of this argument that discredit this rationale. First, ATA certification is a voluntary credential, not a license to practice a profession.

As such, no barrier to entry can be
claimed. Second, ATA has stated that of the estimated 55,000 working translators in the U.S., approximately 2,000 hold ATA certification, which amounts to 3.6%. Additionally, our exam is offered internationally, and with global estimates of the number of working translators exceeding 500,000, ATA-certified translators represent less than 1% of the global translation workforce. Courts would entertain restriction of trade claims if the number of certified individuals were 25–30% of the practitioners of that profession. Our numbers are infinitesimally small compared to that threshold, so this threat is practically nonexistent, and this justification for decoupling is consequently irrelevant.

WHAT CAN—AND SHOULD—BE DONE TO ENHANCE OUR CREDENTIAL?

If the overall aim of ATA’s Board is to enhance the recognition of our credential, then there are various concrete steps that can be taken to do so. For example, promotion of the credential among business and industry associations, through a speakers’ bureau, fact sheets provided to translation users, such as university foreign student admission offices, or perhaps a separate, dedicated website for the certification credential and its benefits directed specifically at translation buyers/users. Engaging ATA-certified translators, external stakeholders, educators, and clients is a key component needed to determine the strategic next steps for our credential, and I welcome the fair and open dialogue ATA is now supporting.

Lastly, many solid, beneficial, and lasting improvements have been made to ATA’s Certification Program in the years following (and truly because of) the Hamm report. Grader training has been expanded, and quality and consistency improvements have been implemented across language combinations.

CONCLUSION

As we move forward toward a membership vote in Boston this fall, I stand firmly against opening our valuable credential to nonmembers, based on the unproven and erroneous arguments put forward as justification by ATA’s Board to date. I look forward to engaging discussion through the fora provided by ATA and in other discussion venues.

Notes


Opening the Exam: Too Many Unknowns
By Jessica Hartstein, CT, CI
ATA-certified (Spanish>English and French>English), Credentialed Interpreter Legal (Spanish)
Houston, Texas

Members, this is your chance to vote and let your voice be heard! When you decide whether you want to open ATA’s certification exam to nonmembers, there are several factors to consider.

CREDIBILITY

First, let’s consider why ATA wants to open the exam to nonmembers and whether doing so would achieve ATA’s goal. The main rationale for opening the exam to nonmembers, as stated in The ATA Chronicle and other ATA forums, is to enhance the credibility of the Certification Program.

Question #1: Does the ATA Certification Program have a credibility issue? Among my clients and colleagues, I’ve found that ATA’s Certification Program is very well-respected. Being ATA-certified has opened numerous doors for me professionally, and I suspect that’s true for many of you as well.

Even if there were a credibility issue (which I don’t think there is), what are some other potential solutions? I would think the best solutions would have something to do with the nature of the exam itself. For example, time constraints, passage length, passage difficulty, preventing cheating, consistency of the grading process, and the qualifications of the candidates. No such changes are being presented along with decoupling, so the exam results themselves wouldn’t become more respected by opening the exam.

Do your clients know that ATA certification is only available to members? Would they find it more credible if nonmembers took the exam?

Question #2: Would opening the exam to all translators around the world drive more clients to you? The FAQs on decoupling published in the November–December issue of The ATA Chronicle say that more certified translators would increase the recognition of the profession.

If Harvard doubled the size of its graduating class, a degree would be less valuable for each Harvard graduate. Harvard would create more alumni telling others about their school, but eventually the graduates themselves would not be as respected as they are now. The FAQs on decoupling indicate there are around 40,000 U.S.-based translators who are not ATA members, and, according to the Translators Association of China, as of 2012, there were an estimated 640,000 translators worldwide. Per ATAs website, we offer the exam in 10 countries worldwide (seven of them in Spanish-speaking countries), but they could be held anywhere.

Using the Hamm Report as the Basis

Question #3: Does the Hamm Report clearly state that opening today’s exam is the correct course of action? I recommend you read the entire 21-page Hamm Report, as it’s the basis for ATA’s
desire to open the exam. When you do, you’ll see that opening the certification exam to nonmembers in its current state is not what Michael Hamm recommended back in 2000.

In his conclusions, he listed nine action items, none of which were opening the exam to nonmembers. His action items included a myriad of operational and exam improvements, many of which have been implemented to the benefit of the program. He recommended separating the Certification Program into an independent body “with minimal involvement from the Association” (this hasn’t been done). He recommended this because it “is an important issue in terms of achieving recognition from external stakeholders such as government agencies.”

He also recommended adding eligibility requirements for exam-takers to prevent people with no educational/professional translation experience from becoming certified translators (something I’ve witnessed since eligibility requirements to register for the exam were removed in 2017).

ATA removed the eligibility requirements because the pass rate hadn’t improved. However, Michael Hamm’s recommendation wasn’t about the pass rate, it was about the credibility of the program being adversely affected when non-translators pass the exam. He stated that eligibility requirements “help inform stakeholders of the proposed level of the examination.” A lack of eligibility requirements could tell the public this is an entry-level exam. I’ve researched other professional certification (and licensing) exams, and every other professional exam I read about has eligibility requirements. Without them, people who are not serious about the profession will have the same credential, and that lowers credibility. Is it time to bring eligibility requirements back?

Question 4: Will decoupling today’s exam improve credibility in the eyes of government agencies? In the report, Hamm considered opening the exam to nonmembers to be a “critical marketing issue.” He mentioned that “membership requirements are a major ‘turn off’ to external stakeholder groups that are evaluating the credibility of certification programs” and that “government agencies are particularly uncomfortable with these rules when they are asked to recognize or endorse a certification program.” He didn’t back up these general statements—no peer-reviewed publication was cited, for example. He also didn’t speak to anyone outside ATA about our Certification Program, so we don’t even know if any specific external stakeholders or government agencies care about decoupling or what policies they would change in response. His statements were made 20 years ago, when he recommended ATA create a three- to five-year strategic plan. Now it’s time for us to decide for ourselves what ATA should do next.

There are many unknowns, so much so that it seems too risky to press on without doing more research.

TOO MANY UNKNOWNS

There are many unknowns, so much so that it seems too risky to press on without doing more research. For example, ATA stated it has not done a market study on how many people would take the exam if it were opened. ProZ recently asked its translators whether they would be interested in taking ATA’s certification exam if it were open to nonmembers. Only 20% of the ProZ translators who participated in the poll indicated they weren’t interested. ATA also hasn’t surveyed current membership about decoupling, and doesn’t know how many certified members would leave if membership was no longer required to maintain certification. Losing experienced members hurts ATA.

I’m so thankful for the volunteer graders generously sharing their expertise and time and making our Certification Program so strong. ATA hasn’t published the results of any well-executed survey of graders to know how many of them would be demotivated from volunteering in this new scenario. (Some graders have already publicly and privately stated they would leave the program.) The Spanish language pair would likely be the most affected by the increased demand. Could our graders, ATA Headquarters staff, and the Ethics Committee really handle the...
increased demand for all language pairs, especially if we lost a significant number of graders? Just one language pair losing key graders could make the whole program lose credibility.

The cost of the exam and renewal fees for nonmembers has not yet been published. Without survey/market research/cost numbers to plug into equations, the financial impact is still unknown. A bigger ATA is a stronger ATA from which we all benefit. According to the free decoupling webinar ATA presented in October, 25% of all new members join ATA to take the exam.1 Think about how losing those 400+ new members year after year will look for us 10, 20, or 30 years down the road.

WHAT DO OTHERS THINK?
Recently, I reached out to some ATA colleagues from different language pairs, different parts of the country, certified and not certified, men and women, and simply asked, “What do you think about opening the exam to nonmembers?” These colleagues are currently supporting themselves through translation work, they actively participate in ATA, and none of them hold leadership positions. Eighty percent told me that they were against opening the exam, and the other 20% were undecided. I thought this was compelling because I had never talked to these colleagues about ATA politics before, so I truly wasn’t trying to skew the results.

AMA AND ABA DON’T ADMINISTER BOARD/BAR EXAMS
ATA has mentioned that you don’t have to be a member of the American Medical Association (AMA) or American Bar Association (ABA) to take the board/bar exams. However, these associations don’t administer the board/bar exams or issue licenses.

VOLUNTARY CREDENTIAL
ATA certification has always been a voluntary credential, a way to stand out. No law requires the use of ATA-certified translators, and most translators working today are not certified. Therefore, it’s not a barrier to entry, and we’re not illegally controlling any supply.

The legal concern might make more sense if ATA is pursuing legislation that would require the use of ATA-certified translators across the U.S. Is that happening? If so, members ought to know.

RELEVANT CASE STUDY
Just a few years ago, the International Council on Systems Engineering decided to add a membership requirement to its certification program. ATA is looking at going in the opposite direction with decoupling.

LEADERSHIP
I wholeheartedly believe ATA leaders are committed to our organization and do their jobs/volunteer work with the best of intentions. We’ve all benefited from their contributions. I have a common goal with our leaders: wanting a strong ATA and Certification Program. Questioning whether opening today’s exam to nonmembers would achieve that goal shouldn’t take that away.

Question #3: Should ATA leadership’s first priority be our members, who have a lot to lose if this doesn’t go well, or the tens of thousands of translators who haven’t joined us? The FAQs state that opening the exam would benefit the entire industry, but no specific evidence has been presented regarding how. Members deserve some concrete evidence regarding how this would directly benefit them before removing a beloved member right that makes ATA so strong.

CONCLUSION
I appreciate that the Board will allow us to vote on this matter, as the Bylaws list taking the certification exam under its list of Member Rights, next to the rights to vote, hold office, and serve on the Board of Directors and all committees of the Association.

There are lots of ways to improve the credibility of ATA that don’t involve decoupling, and I would like to be a part of a solution. I hope you will join me. We could enhance the credibility of the Certification Program and ATA brand by working with external stakeholders and government agencies to better inform them of the strengths of our members and our current program. We could also do more public outreach to increase the recognition of the industry and work harder to retain and attract members.

NOTES

We want to hear from you!
Members are encouraged to submit their opinions, both pro and con, regarding opening ATA’s certification exam to nonmembers (also referred to as decoupling) for publication in The ATA Chronicle. While it may not be possible to print all submissions, equal space will be provided for dissenting opinions. Please send to jeff@atanet.org.

Note: In keeping with standard ATA editorial policy, submissions must include the author’s name, which will be published. Anonymous submissions will not be accepted for publication.
IT’S MORE THAN CREDIBILITY—
IT’S BEST PRACTICE

Obviously, we don’t have a crystal ball to peer into the future, but there’s plenty of proof to suggest that decoupling is the right way forward. The biggest argument against decoupling appears to be the notion that there is no evidence that other credentials have increased credibility after a membership requirement was removed. Here’s the thing: in the association world, best practice is (and has been) to separate credentialing from membership. A membership requirement is the exception rather than the rule. What’s more, requiring membership has not been shown to add value to a credential. It’s clear that the vast majority of professional associations see greater value in a “decoupled” credential.

IT’S MORE THAN LOGICAL—
IT’S THE RIGHT STEP FORWARD

Organizations constantly have to weigh the pros and cons of the status quo versus moving in a new direction. Although it may feel safer to leave things the way they are, associations that fail to adapt become
stagnant and irrelevant. Our profession is changing rapidly. Decoupling is not only the logical step forward, it’s the right one. By removing the membership requirement, ATA greatly expands the pool of translators eligible to take the exam. We’re creating conditions to enable more participation. The only way we’ll ever know if nonmembers will choose to do so is by actually allowing them to make that choice.

What’s more, by separating membership from the credential, ATA makes it clear that we are the recognized certifying body for the entire profession, not just for people who choose to be members. This will inevitably increase our Association’s stature.

**IT’S MORE THAN OPENING UP THE EXAM—IT’S ABOUT REMOVING BARRIERS**

The logic behind decoupling actually doesn’t stop there. We know that people are interested in becoming ATA-certified and that the hurdle of membership is real.

Case in point: ATA’s Government Division has confirmed something ATA already knew, though until recently only anecdotally. Many government employees, including military members, can gain approval and receive funding to attain civilian certifications relevant to their principal occupations. The Department of Defense Credentialing Opportunities On-Line (COOL) program is one example.² ATA’s certification exam is not eligible to participate because the program stipulates that the credentialing body may not require membership.

That program is only the tip of the iceberg. Although ATA can’t precisely predict demand for the certification exam, we know it is there and it is real.

**SPEAKING OF DEMAND…**

One of the opinion pieces published in the January/February 2020 issue of The ATA Chronicle³ cited a ProZ poll⁴ from December 2019, but very relevant results were ignored. Take a closer look: 38% of those who participated said they would want to take ATA’s certification exam if it was open to nonmembers. Another 20% said “maybe.” That’s nearly 60%!

Obviously, we can’t judge the accuracy of this poll, but ProZ is an international community of translators so we can’t deny that it indicates considerable interest in our credential around the world.

**IT’S MORE THAN REPORTS AND BYLAWS—IT’S ABOUT DUE DILIGENCE**

The Hamm Report⁵ has been named repeatedly in this debate. That’s because it started our Association down this path. But this report is not—and never has been—the decoupling bible. Whether or not the Board chose to follow all of the report’s recommendations is beside the point. The finding that an independent credential will be a more credible credential hasn’t changed.

ATA’s Bylaws have also been hijacked, first by the claim that the Board wasn’t authorized to make this move. Indeed, there was concern about this issue, which is why the Board consulted with ATA’s legal counsel, received a favorable legal response, and decided to move ahead. Now that decoupling has been postponed and the Board has proposed an amendment to make it clear in the Bylaws that taking the certification exam is not an exclusive member right, the Bylaws are once again being used to spread misinformation. Let’s be clear: the amendment will not remove any ATA member’s right to take the certification exam and become ATA-certified as stated in the opinion pieces published in the January/February 2020 issue of this publication. It extends the right to all translators in our profession to sit for the exam, and if they pass, become ATA-certified. To say otherwise is false and misleading.

The fact is that the Board has done its due diligence. Our Association’s finances have been reviewed, structures are in place, and the Certification Committee is ready to go. It’s time to do this, and I urge every voting member to vote “yes” on the amendment.

Obviously we can’t see beyond the horizon, but I’ve watched our ship’s officers carefully plot this course and I believe it’s the right one. Considering that some 75% of ATA’s current members are not certified, it seems that most of us—including me, a member since 2000 and only certified since 2017—understand that the value of ATA membership goes way beyond certification. If we open ATA’s certification exam to all professional translators, we will set sail on a journey that could take our credential—and our Association—to the next level. ☺

**NOTES**


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Decoupling: A Solution in Search of a Problem

By Mike Magee, CT
ATA-certified (German>English)
Austin, Texas

ATA voting members will face an important decision on the October 2020 ballot: should members retain the right to take certification exams, or should this right be downgraded to a membership benefit? The amendment proposed by ATA’s Board would permanently change the nature of the certified translator (CT) credential and the requirements for sitting for the certification exam, opening both to nonmembers (“decoupling”). I believe this proposed amendment is not in the best interests of ATA or its members, and I urge a “No” vote.

The relevant portion of the proposed Bylaws amendment of Article III, Section 3 reads:

a. Active members have the right to attend any of the Association’s membership meetings, use all of its membership facilities, and receive all of its regular publications free or at special membership rates. They also have the right to take certification examinations, to vote, to hold Association office, and to serve on the Board of Directors and all committees of the Association. They also have the privilege of free or reduced rates for use of the Association’s membership resources, including professional development events, certification examinations, and all of its regular publications.

Passage of this amendment would clear the way for decoupling ATA certification from membership in the future, provided that the established financial and logistical preconditions are met.

ATA Certification: A Longstanding Member Right

The first ATA certification exams (known as “ATA accreditation” until January 1, 2004) were given in the early 1970s. From that time onward, the right to earn ATA’s credential has figured prominently in the Bylaws, in the same sentence as the right to vote and serve as an elected officeholder. For decades, the credential was so central that it was the primary route to earning ATA voting rights.

The CT credential is a primary contributor to the ongoing health and vitality of ATA, as evidenced by a certified member retention rate of 95%, while the retention rate for noncertified members is approximately 75%. Professional standards are inextricably linked to a continuing commitment to professional education and development, and a membership requirement affirms this commitment beyond meeting the minimum continuing education requirements.
ATA IS A MEMBERSHIP ASSOCIATION, NOT A CERTIFYING BODY

Per Article II, a. of ATA’s Bylaws, the Association’s purpose is to promote recognition of the translation and interpreting professions and provide professional and educational opportunities and cooperation. Some professionals, including interpreters in a number of states, hold certifications issued by independent credentialing entities. Although certification consultant Michael Hamm, in his May 2000 report, recommended such a structure for ATA certification, this option has not been under consideration. ATA is not primarily a certifying body, but rather a professional educational membership organization, and that is what it should remain.

STATUTE OF ATA’S CERTIFICATION CREDENTIAL

ATA has repeatedly stated that opening certification to nonmembers would “enhance the stature” of the CT credential. Decoupling is in no way a proven path to greater recognition.

These changes would actually decrease the stature of the CT credential in the eyes of many clients and members. A certification consultant may propose various routes to “enhanced stature,” but what matters to clients and vested stakeholders is that certified individuals are committed to high standards of professional practice as evidenced by the rigors of the exam, continuing education requirements, and adherence to a professional code of ethics.

Current ethics enforcement efforts are problematic at best, and they would only become more difficult if nonmembers took the exam. Current sanctions include suspension of ATA membership, which obviously could not apply to nonmembers who misrepresent their certified status, making any enforcement effectively impossible among offending translators in the U.S. or any other country. This would result in disparate imposition of sanctions and enforcement, and would clearly contribute to a decoupled ATA credential being viewed as less prestigious.

Lastly, comparisons between American Medical Association or American Bar Association licensing and ATA certification are invalid. Physicians and attorneys in the U.S. are licensed by governing bodies in each state, while ATA certification is a voluntary credential offered to translators worldwide. The establishment of a license-type credential governed by a separate credentialing entity is a massive undertaking that would require changes to laws nationwide and is far beyond the current reach of ATA.

DOES ATA CONTROL THE SUPPLY OF CERTIFIED TRANSLATORS?

ATA leadership has asserted that nonmember access to certification would dispel any perception that “a certifying association may be controlling the supply of certified individuals.” In fact, the potential for such a perception is practically nil. With approximately 2,100 ATA-certified individuals, holders of the CT credential represent about 3.8% of the estimated 55,000 practicing translators in the United States. Among hundreds of thousands of translators worldwide, this percentage is even more negligible in the global context.

ATA’s membership requirement does not stand alone—the Institute of Translation and Interpreting (ITI) has a number of certified individuals similar to the number holding ATA certification, and they are required to maintain membership and complete continuing education credits to maintain the credential, which is referred to as being a “Qualified Member” of ITI.

CONCLUSION

ATA certification and membership together represent a significant commitment on the part of certified translators to uphold high professional standards. Attaining ATA certification was a significant factor in my joining 28 years ago, and continues to be an important reason for maintaining my membership. Its exclusivity to membership represents the gold standard for our profession, not a shortcoming that needs to be remedied. While I wholeheartedly support ATA’s goals that concretely enhance the quality and stature of the existing Certification Program, I believe that the current proposal to decouple the certification credential from ATA membership is ill-advised and unlikely to achieve those goals.

Therefore, I will vote “No” on the proposed Bylaws amendment, and I encourage other voting members to do the same.

NOTES

3. Communication from ATA Headquarters and calculation based on those figures.

We want to hear from you!

Members are encouraged to submit their opinions, both pro and con, regarding opening ATA’s certification exam to nonmembers (also referred to as decoupling) for publication in The ATA Chronicle or Chronicle-Online website. While it may not be possible to print all submissions, equal space will be provided for members to present views on both sides of the issue. Please send to jeff@atanet.org.

Note: In keeping with standard ATA editorial policy, submissions must include the author’s name, which will be published. Anonymous submissions will not be accepted for publication.
Arguments and statements both in favor of and against decoupling have been published in *The ATA Chronicle*. If you have not read them, I encourage you to do so. I won’t repeat all the arguments in favor or against here. But I will present what I personally believe to be the most pertinent reasons why decoupling membership from the certification exam is the right thing to do.

First, however, I would like to comment on the arguments made by opponents of decoupling. Opinion pieces and letters to the editor arguing against opening the exam to nonmembers were published in the January/February 2020, March/April 2020, May/June 2020, and July/August 2020 editions of *The ATA Chronicle*. In every instance, these concerned members presented rebuttals to the pro-decoupling arguments and made arguments for why decoupling is not a good idea. Some asked valid and pertinent questions about ATA’s Certification Program. I can even acknowledge that some of their rebuttal arguments may have some validity. But not one of these members presented a single argument or statement on why membership is a valid eligibility criterion for taking the exam.

And that’s the crux of the matter. Membership is not a valid eligibility requirement. This is why the Hamm Report specifically recommended that “the current membership-based requirements for eligibility should be eliminated” and why the recently commissioned opinion by Lenora Knapp, another certification specialist, stated that “requiring ATA membership is contrary to, and inconsistent with, current, accepted practice and quality standards pertaining to professional certification programs.”

Both statements were based on principles and standards for eligibility requirements for certification programs. When applied to the certification exam, these principles require that eligibility requirements should be directly linked to the ability to translate from the source to the target language. There is no direct link between membership and the ability to translate—as Hamm stated, “paying dues…has nothing to do with one’s knowledge, skills, or ability.” These standards also require that eligibility criteria should not be used to limit the number of applicants or exclude qualified candidates. A membership requirement does just that.

Most important to my mind, however, is the fact that limiting the exam to members only is inconsistent with, if not directly contrary to, our Bylaws. The first objective stated in our Bylaws is “to promote the recognition of the translation and interpreting professions.” They go on to say that ATA shall strive to meet its objectives by “supporting programs of accreditation and certification for translators and interpreters who meet specific standards of competence” (emphasis added). They do not say that ATA should support certification programs for ATA members only. Membership in ATA is not a “standard of competence” and therefore...
The issue of removing membership as an eligibility requirement for taking the certification exam (aka “decoupling”) has been around for at least 20 years now. Restricting certification to members only flies in the face of our Bylaws. Restricting the Certified Translator designation to members only is something one would expect from a protectionist-based medieval guild composed of “masters” and “journeymen,” not a modern professional association such as ATA. Based on our own Bylaws and recognized standards and principles for valid certification programs, membership should be eliminated as an eligibility requirement for the certification exam. It’s the right thing to do. I therefore urge you to vote in favor of the proposed Bylaws amendment so that ATA can follow its stated objectives and adhere to current, accepted practice and quality standards of professional certification programs.

NOTES

STATEMENT IN SUPPORT OF PROPOSED DECOUPLING BYLAWS AMENDMENT
We, the undersigned former officers and directors of the American Translators Association, do hereby voice our support for the Bylaws amendment proposed by the Board of Directors clarifying that taking ATA’s certification exam is not an exclusive membership right and that, therefore, nonmembers may be allowed to take the certification exam in accordance with policies and procedures approved by the Board of Directors.

We urge all Active and Corresponding Members of ATA to vote FOR the proposed Bylaws amendment.

David Rumsey  
President/President–Elect (2013–2017); Director (2008–2013)

Ann Macfarlane  
President/President–Elect (1997–2001)

Corinne McKay  
President/President–Elect (2015–2019); Director (2012–2015)

Jiri Stejskal  

Caitlin Walsh  
President/President–Elect (2011–2015); Director (2007–2010)

Thomas West III  
President/President–Elect (1999–2003); Treasurer (1996–1999)

Rudy Heller  
Secretary (2015–2016); Director (2013–2014)

Jane Maier  

Alan Melby  

Boris Silversteyn  
Secretary (2011–2015); Director (2005–2011)

Beatriz Bonnet  
Director (2000–2005)

Robert Croese  
Director (2001–2004)

Evelyn Yang Garland  
Director (2013–2019)

Jean Leblon  
Director (2003–2006)

Odile Legeay  
Director (2009–2015)

Jacki Noh  
Director (2005–2008)

Frieda Ruppaner–Lind  

Faiza Sultan  
Director (2012–2018)

Izumi Suzuki  
Director (1997–2000)

Liliana Valenzuela  
Director (2005–2008)

Madeleine Velguth  
Director (2001–2002)
A MEMBERSHIP ASSOCIATION OR A WORLDWIDE CREDENTIALING BODY?
Jessica Hartstein, CT, CI
ATA-certified (Spanish>English and French>English)
Credentialed Interpreter Legal (Spanish)
Houston, Texas

Burden of Proof: The first sentence of our Bylaws describes ATA as a “membership corporation.” The onus is on ATA to make a convincing case that our membership corporation should open its exam to nonmembers. General, nice sounding statements that decoupling (i.e., opening the exam to nonmembers) will positively impact the profession and ATA have been provided without evidence, but some very real risks to the Association have also been presented.1

Are members missing out on concrete opportunities because only ATA members can take the certification exam? For most, probably not. ATA has not provided the names of any large freelance translation buyers who do not recognize ATA certification due to this. No indication has been made that coupling membership with certification has hurt our credibility among any large segment of translation buyers. We have a credible and valuable program thanks to the hard work of so many.

Members Decide on the Future of the Certification Program: Thanks to the Certification Program being established in the Bylaws as a member right, the future of the program is in your hands if you choose to vote in this year’s election.2

Bylaws Amendment Wording Is Indirect: I expected that when members were asked to vote on decoupling, the proposed Bylaws amendment would say what it means and mean what it says. I thought the Bylaws amendment would be presented as follows:

Article III, Section 3—Rights and Privileges
a. Active members have the right to attend any of the Association’s membership meetings, use all of its membership facilities, and receive all of its regular publications free or at special membership rates. They also have the right to take certification examinations, to vote, to hold Association office, and to serve on the Board of Directors and all committees of the Association.

With this wording, we would know exactly what we were voting for: opening the exam to everyone.

I was disappointed to see that the actual amendment that will be presented to members includes several other (arguably unnecessary) changes, making the intention and impact of the amendment less obvious.3 Members should not have to read between the lines of the amendment wording to know what they are voting for. Certainly, some members will only look at the wording of the amendment and carelessly miss the fact that a vote to give members the privilege to take the test “at a discounted price” will be considered by ATA as a vote in favor of opening the exam to nonmembers. This is a very indirect way of presenting this issue.

For your information, the Board takes an AGAINST vote to mean “I do not want to open the exam to nonmembers.”

Opening the Exam Does Not Directly Help Most Members: I have yet to see ATA provide a clear, logical, and specific example of how the average member who supports themselves with translation and interpreting work will directly benefit from opening the exam to nonmembers. I would like to share some things that otherwise happy members have not been participating in these public discussions have told me: “What would be the point of ATA, then?” “I’ll be the first to leave if they do this!” “This will not help my business.” These members don’t see tangible benefits for the Association or their own businesses. If the fact that members expect ATA to prioritize the professional lives and Association benefits of paying members seems outlandish or in conflict with our purpose, perhaps we need to rethink our purpose. Are we fundamentally a credentialing entity or a membership association?

I recently saw longtime ATA Spanish Division members with decades of translation experience discuss leaving the industry because they are unable to support themselves. I wish we were having this passionate of a debate about what we, as an association, can do directly to change this. We have limited resources and opening an exam to nonmembers does not seem like the most direct route to positive change.

I want to recognize that ATA has presented the first concrete example of one subgroup of ATA members who would directly benefit from decoupling: active members of the armed services. Their employer, the Department of Defense, would pay for their exam if we decoupled.4 ATA’s Government Linguist Taskforce has been hard at work recruiting active members of the armed services and ATA has recently offered military personnel 50% off their first two years of membership.5

Are we fundamentally a credentialing entity or a membership association?

Experts Weigh In: ATA’s Certification Program Needs Eligibility Criteria for the Sake of Credibility: Lenora Knapp, a credentialing expert, wrote in the July/August issue of The ATA Chronicle that eligibility requirements should not “be such that unqualified individuals can earn the credential simply by passing the exam.”6 With no educational or experience requirement to take the exam, ATA is not currently able to prevent non-translators from taking it. Thus, it is not ensuring that its exam candidates are “translators and interpreters who meet specific standards of competence,” as stated in ATA’s Bylaws.

In my opinion piece in the January/February issue of The ATA Chronicle regarding opening the exam to nonmembers, I reported that Michael Hamm (a credentialing expert engaged by ATA 20 years ago) also made the case that educational/experience eligibility requirements were essential to credibility.7 If this exam is aimed at mid-career professional translators, candidates would be able to meet certain educational/experience requirements. Why don’t we bring these requirements back?
Law school graduates are expected to provide proof of eligibility for the Texas Bar exam. We clearly want to protect the credibility and integrity of our credential just as other organizations do. Eligibility criteria (and preventing people from fraudulently misrepresenting our credential) should not be considered administrative burdens because they have a bigger impact on our credibility than decoupling.

I love best practices, but the argument that coupling membership is not a best practice loses strength when there are other very significant credentialing best practices that we are ignoring. Please read my opinion piece in the January/February issue to learn more about this and the unknowns of opening the exam.

Antitrust Is Not Applicable: Doctors are required by law to have a medical license; ATA-certification is optional. There are 350 languages spoken across the U.S. We offer certification in about 20 languages. The vast majority of translators earn their income without ATA certification, so there is really no concern that ATA is preventing anyone from working.

Conclusion: I’m so thankful to ATA’s Certification Program for its hard work in creating a well-respected credential. ATA has not shown that this amendment will directly help most members, so I hope you’ll vote “AGAINST.”

NOTES
2. ATA’s Bylaws can be found here: www.atanet.org/docs/p_bylaws.pdf.

The vast majority of translators earn their income without ATA certification, so there is really no concern that ATA is preventing anyone from working.

MULTIPLE CANDIDATES BYLAWS AMENDMENT: SUPPORT COMPETITIVEATA ELECTIONS
Patricia C. de Ribes, CT
ATA-certified (French->English)
San Marcos, Texas

In every ATA election, voting members have several important decisions to make. In addition to voting for three director positions in 2020, we will vote on two Bylaws amendments.

The first Bylaws amendment is a Board initiative to decouple ATA certification from membership and open the certification exam to nonmembers. An “Against” vote on this amendment will ensure that our certified translator credential remains tied to ATA membership and will preserve the member right to take certification exams.

The second proposed amendment, the Multiple Candidates Bylaws Amendment, is the result of a member-initiated petition. A “For” vote on this amendment will require the Nominating and Leadership Development Committee (NLDC) to propose at least two candidates for each ATA officer position: president-elect, secretary, and treasurer. This Bylaws amendment would ensure that elections are competitive.

The Nominating and Leadership Development Committee
The NLDC has proposed more than one candidate for an officer position on just three occasions since 2005. Although the Bylaws do provide for candidacy by petition, this should not be the sole means for providing a choice of candidates. While election by acclamation is the policy at the ATA division level, elections for officers should make it possible for members to vote in competitive elections to elect those who will best represent ATA and its members.

The NLDC chair and committee members are appointed by the Board. Since 2005, in the absence of competitive elections, the five members of the NLDC, rather than the majority of ATA voters, have been effectively selecting ATA’s officers and setting the course for the Association. When a secretary and treasurer are elected, they will serve for the next two years. Once elected, the president-elect serves two years in that position, followed by two years as president.

Elections Policy
ATAs Board Elections Policy was revised in August 2019 to read: “It [the NLDC] shall propose at least two candidates for each officer position (president-elect, secretary, and treasurer) and at least two candidates for each director position.”

This short-lived version of the Elections Policy was superseded in October 2019 by one that characterized multiple candidates for each position as merely an option rather than a requirement: “It [the NLDC] shall propose preferably two candidates for each officer position (president-elect, secretary, and treasurer) and at least two candidates for each director position.”

In August 2020, the Board approved yet another revised Elections Policy. According to this version: “It [the NLDC] shall propose at least one candidate for each officer position (president-elect, secretary, and treasurer) and at least one candidate for each director position.”