

Key Recommendations of the Application Task Force

Summary

The CCA Application Requirements Task Force conducted a comprehensive review of education, experience, and reference requirements for CCA certification. The group examined how well current requirements reflect real-world competency, support program integrity, and accommodate the increasingly diverse pathways into crop advising.

Recent university enrollment data further underscores this shift. For example, Spring 2025 undergraduate enrollment at the University of Florida shows significantly higher enrollment in interdisciplinary and biological science fields alongside smaller numbers in narrowly agronomic majors. At the University of Illinois (May 2025), graduates in Agricultural Business/Economics (192) and Natural Resources/Soils (74) substantially exceeded traditional Crop Science majors (29), illustrating the widening range of academic pathways entering agriculture-related careers.

Table 1: University of Florida Spring 2025 Enrollment by Major

Major	Enrollment
Biology	632
Microbiology	546
Food & Resource Economics	190
Plant Science	111
Soil & Water Science	2

Across discussions, the task force consistently emphasized two principles:

1. **Competency should be demonstrated primarily through experience and performance, not narrow academic proxies, and**
2. **Requirements should be clear, streamlined, and inclusive of qualified candidates with nontraditional backgrounds, while preserving local board judgment and**

professional standards. This emphasis on inclusivity reflects broader trends in agricultural education, as shown in Table 1 and 2.

The task force reached broad consensus on several targeted changes to simplify application documentation, modernize education and experience equivalencies, clarify how farm and advisory experience are evaluated, and improve the usefulness of references. These findings form the basis for proposed policy revisions to be presented to the ICCA Board for consideration.

Key Recommendations

1. Remove Application Requirements for Reference Letters

- Reference letters were viewed as low-hanging fruit to streamline the application process. Critical referrals are never sent to boards, and rarely if ever a deciding factor in applications.
- Requiring **names and contact information for references**, rather than formal letters, would preserve boards' ability to verify experience while reducing paperwork for applicants and staff.
- Application documentation can be simplified by accepting **either a transcript or diploma** as proof of degree.

2. Accept Applicants with Any Type of Degree

- The group agreed that passing the test and experience should be the determining factor in whether someone is qualified to be a CCA. Therefore, **education requirements should be based on the highest degree attained**, regardless of whether the degree is “related” or “unrelated.”
 - The existing category of “unrelated degree” was seen as unnecessarily exclusionary and inconsistent with how candidates become competent crop advisers.
 - Recommended combination of education and experience, regardless of course work or type of degree:
 - Bachelor’s degree or higher: **2 years experience**
 - Associate (two-year) degree: **3 years experience**
 - No degree: **4 years experience**
- This revision to requirements simplifies the application by **removing coursework lists from requirements**.
- This will also help distinguish the CCA from the CPAg Credential.

3. Experience Definitions Require Clearer Guidance, Not Tighter Gates

The task force agreed that qualifying experience should be crop production–related and involve advising on or making crop production decisions, regardless of whether the role is on-farm, advisory, teaching, or conservation-focused.

The group emphasized that clearer definitions are needed to improve consistency, not to restrict access for qualified candidates.

The task force supported:

- **Defining qualifying experience as advising on or making crop production decisions.**
 - **Guidance and examples will be provided to local boards, who will make the final decision.**
- Clarifying that **experience must be crop production–related**, whether in farming, advising, teaching, or conservation roles
- Distinguishing between growing up on a farm, working as a farm hand, and managing or owning a farm, with emphasis on decision-making responsibility
- **Evaluating farm experience based on crop production decision-making**, not proximity to farming alone
- Allowing teaching and conservation roles to count when they include direct crop production advising or applied agronomic guidance
- **Capping farm-based experience at 50% of the total required experience.**
 - For applicants with more experience, this increases the total farming experience that could qualify from one year to two years.
- Providing clearer experience descriptions and examples on application forms to support consistent board review

Local board discretion remains essential, with clearer policy language intended to promote transparency and consistency across boards while maintaining professional standards.

4. International Degrees

Degree terminology (associate, bachelor's, etc.) should be clarified for international applicants to ensure equivalency, transparency, and consistent interpretation across all countries where CCAs operate.

The task force noted that degree structures and terminology vary significantly by country, and clearer guidance is needed to support fair evaluation of international applicants.

The task force supported:

- Working with international boards to identify country-specific degree structures and common equivalents
- Developing guidance on international degree terminology to improve consistency in application review
- Recognizing comparable credentials (e.g., technical and applied post-secondary programs) where they align with CCA competency expectations
- Providing examples of degree equivalents in key countries (e.g., in Mexico, an associate degree equivalent may include Técnico Superior Universitario (TSU) or Profesional Asociado programs)
- Ensuring international applicants are evaluated based on educational relevance and competency, not solely U.S.-based degree labels

Local board input will be essential to confirm appropriate equivalencies and maintain standards while improving clarity and accessibility for international candidates.

Appendix: Guidance for Local Boards on Qualifying Experience

Core Principle

Qualifying experience should involve **advising on or making crop production decisions** that affect agronomic outcomes. The key question: Was this person responsible for decisions (or recommendations to others making decisions) about what to plant, how to manage it, or how to optimize production?

Experience Categories with Examples

Clearly Qualifying Experience

Advisory/Consulting Roles

- Crop consultant making fertility, pest management, or variety recommendations
- Agronomist for a retailer writing nutrient management plans
- Technical Service Provider developing agronomic NRCS plans
- Precision ag specialist interpreting yield data and making variable-rate recommendations
- Seed company agronomist advising growers on hybrid selection and placement

Farm Management/Ownership

- Farm owner or operator making planting, fertility, pest management, and marketing decisions
- Farm manager with decision-making authority over crop production
- Custom application operator who adjusts rates or makes in-field decisions based on conditions (not just following a prescription)

Teaching/Extension

- Extension agent providing applied crop production guidance to farmers
- Ag instructor teaching crop science courses with applied field components
- Research station manager overseeing crop production trials

Conservation/Government

- NRCS employees writing conservation plans that include crop rotation or nutrient management
 - Crop insurance adjuster with agronomic assessment responsibilities
 - State department of agriculture specialist advising on crop production practices
-

Gray Areas—Local Board Judgment Needed

These roles *may* qualify depending on actual responsibilities:

Role	Qualifies If...	Probably Doesn't Qualify If...
Retail salesperson	Provides agronomic recommendations alongside product sales	Simply takes orders and processes transactions
Farm employee	Makes or contributes to crop production decisions	Perform tasks directed by others without input on decisions
Custom applicator	Adjust applications based on field scouting or agronomic judgment	Follows prescriptions without modification
Ag lender	Evaluates crop plans and advises on production decisions	Reviews of financials only without agronomic input
Grain merchandiser	Advice on variety selection, storage, or quality management	Handles logistics and pricing only
Lab technician	Interprets results and makes recommendations	Processes samples without agronomic interpretation

Generally Non-Qualifying Experience

- Growing up on a farm without production decision responsibility
- Farm labor (equipment operation, harvest help) without decision-making role
- Retail counter sales without agronomic advising component
- Administrative or office roles in agricultural businesses
- Trucking, logistics, or grain handling without agronomic assessment

Guidance for Local Boards

When evaluating experience, consider:

1. **Decision-making authority:** Did the applicant make or directly influence crop production decisions, or did they carry out decisions made by others?
2. **Agronomic scope:** Did the work involve fertility, pest management, variety selection, tillage, irrigation, crop rotation, or similar production factors?
3. **Regional relevance:** Does the experience translate to advising in your local cropping systems? (A board in Minnesota might weigh corn/soybean experience differently than one in California evaluating tree fruit experience.)
4. **Documentation:** Can the applicant describe specific decisions they made or recommendations they provided?