



An Overview of the Infrastructure of the ABA Profession

James E. Carr¹  · Tyra P. Sellers² 

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Abstract

The professional practice of applied behavior analysis (ABA) has undergone substantial growth and professionalization in recent years. This growth has been accompanied by the development of a range of systems and organizations that support the profession (e.g., certification and licensure, professional and trade associations, healthcare billing systems). Although many practitioners interact with these elements on a regular basis, their broader role within the profession is not always well understood. The purpose of this article is to describe the core components of the infrastructure supporting the ABA profession. Understanding the functions of these systems may help practitioners better navigate their professional environment and contribute to the continued development of the profession.

Keywords ABA profession · Accreditation · Applied behavior analysis · Certification · Licensure · Professional infrastructure · Professionalization

Behavior analysis has changed substantially in recent decades, particularly with respect to the delivery of ABA-based services. During this period, we have witnessed a rapid increase in the number of credentialed practitioners, the development and expansion of new university training programs, the emergence of national associations supporting practitioners and service organizations, the development of systems related to third-party service reimbursement, and the enactment of licensure laws for behavior analysts in most US states.¹ Collectively, these developments reflect a substantial transformation in the professional practice of ABA. To characterize this transformation and the systems that have developed around it, we must first distinguish among several closely related terms.

The focus of this article is not on behavior analysis in its entirety, but rather on one aspect of it. The term *behavior analysis* is commonly used as an umbrella label for multiple distinct

but related domains (Cooper et al., 2020; Moore, 2022). These domains include (a) *behaviorism*, the underlying philosophical paradigm of behavior analysis; (b) the *experimental analysis of behavior* (EAB), the basic science branch of behavior analysis; (c) *applied behavior analysis* (ABA), the applied science branch of behavior analysis; and (d) the *professional practice of ABA* (see Fig. 1 for an illustration).

Historically, many behavior analysts have used ABA to refer to most applied efforts associated with behavior analysis, particularly following the initial formulation of ABA by Baer et al. (1968). However, Baer et al.'s seven dimensions of ABA were an effort to define an emerging applied *science* and distinguish it from the already established EAB scientific approach. The seven dimensions of ABA did not constitute a definition of ABA-based service delivery. Subsequently, Johnston (1996) proposed that ABA-based service delivery be treated as a distinct domain from ABA research because the two enterprises have distinct goals, contingencies, and support systems. For example, ABA research focuses on identifying procedures that reliably change behavior in socially important ways, typically under tightly controlled conditions. By contrast, ABA-based service delivery uses that information to change behavior in real-world settings and under natural conditions, often without many of the methodological controls necessary for ABA research.

Given the multifaceted nature of *behavior analysis*, it is most accurate to consider it our overarching

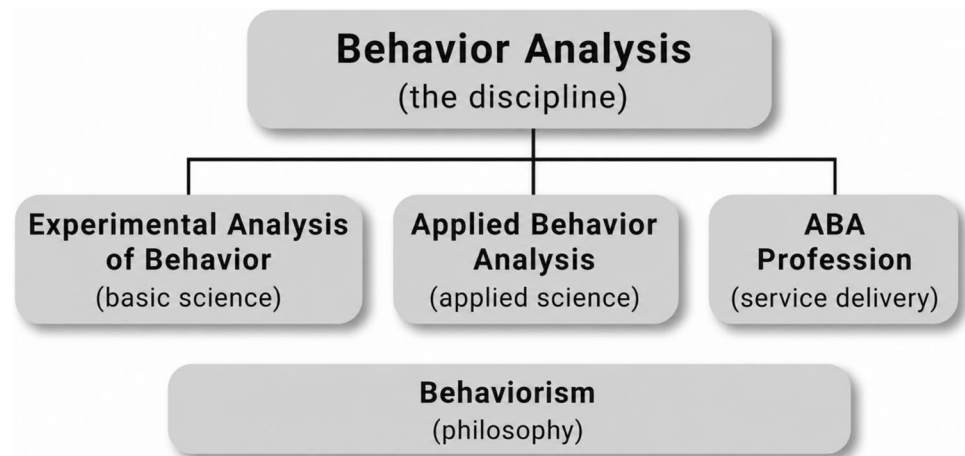
¹ Many of the recent major developments in behavior-analytic support infrastructure have predominantly occurred in the United States. Thus, the United States serves as the context for our manuscript.

✉ James E. Carr
carr@bachb.com

¹ Behavior Analyst Certification Board, 7950 Shaffer Parkway, Littleton, CO 80127, USA

² TP Sellers, LLC, Scappoose, OR, USA

Fig. 1 The four domains of the behavior analysis discipline



*discipline*²—an organized area of inquiry with established theories, methods, and norms that guide the production and evaluation of knowledge (Krishnan, 2009)—with behaviorism as our underlying paradigm, and EAB and ABA as its scientific fields of study. The professional practice of ABA, which has greatly expanded in recent years, now meets the definition of a *profession*. A profession is a type of occupation that has undergone the process of professionalization. This process entails (a) the organized delivery of services to the public, (b) uniform educational requirements based on an established body of knowledge, (c) ethics standards and enforcement, (d) professional credentials (e.g., certification, licensure), and (e) the ability by the professional to exercise independent judgment in their practice (Cruess et al., 2004; Tapper & Millett, 2015). To help differentiate our profession from our applied science, we will use the term *ABA profession* throughout the remainder of the article when referring to the profession.

The ABA profession is relatively new because the required definitional features of a profession have only emerged within the past few decades with the establishment of standardized educational requirements (e.g., university program accreditation), behavior-analytic certification and licensure, behavior-analytic ethics codes and disciplinary enforcement mechanisms, and a dramatic increase in services being offered to the public, among other developments. The various supports and systems for a profession, many of which are provided by organizations, can be termed its *professional infrastructure* (see Fig. 2 for an illustration). The professionalization of behavior-analytic service delivery has been an important milestone for behavior analysis. However, the rapidity with which this has occurred and the relative

newness of the ABA profession are associated with various challenges. Our professional infrastructure is incomplete, and not all of it is yet operating at a steady state. Indeed, the ABA profession is an immature one, lacking some features enjoyed by mature professions such as the practice of medicine or clinical psychology.

Because the ABA profession is relatively new and its professional infrastructure remains incomplete, it is important for its members, especially those just entering the profession, to understand its current status. Working in an incomplete, immature profession means that certain supports and resources enjoyed by those working in more mature professions might not exist. For example, ABA practitioners do not always have reliable access to funding for their services, licensure in every state, or a wide range of practice guidelines to support their work. A practitioner who is aware of the incompleteness of their profession and how its infrastructure is organized will have a context to understand the absence or underdevelopment of certain supports and perhaps be motivated to help develop them or advocate for their development with the appropriate parties. By contrast, a practitioner who is unaware of the profession's current context might not understand where to seek appropriate support or why it may not currently exist. Thus, the purpose of this article is to describe the core elements of the ABA profession's infrastructure and their roles in supporting professional practice to help behavior analysts better appreciate our profession's current era.

Recent Growth of the Profession

The ABA profession has emerged over the past few decades, and its workforce has grown dramatically. This is supported by several metrics, but before we turn to the data, it is important to discuss the factors that led to the recent growth. Although some elements of the ABA

² The term “field” is sometimes used as a synonym for both “discipline” and “profession.” However, given the lack of specificity of that term, we use the latter terms for better precision.

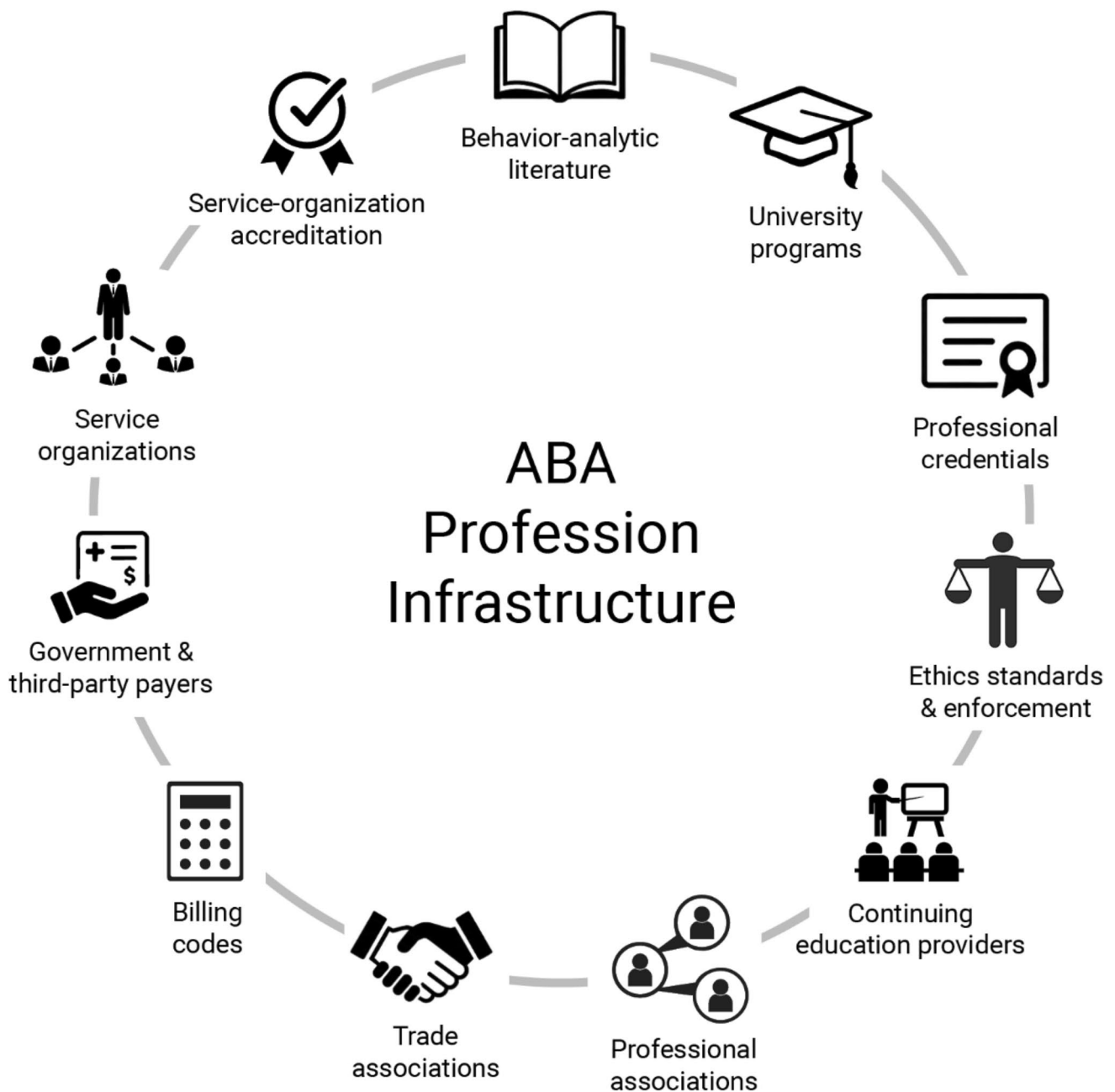
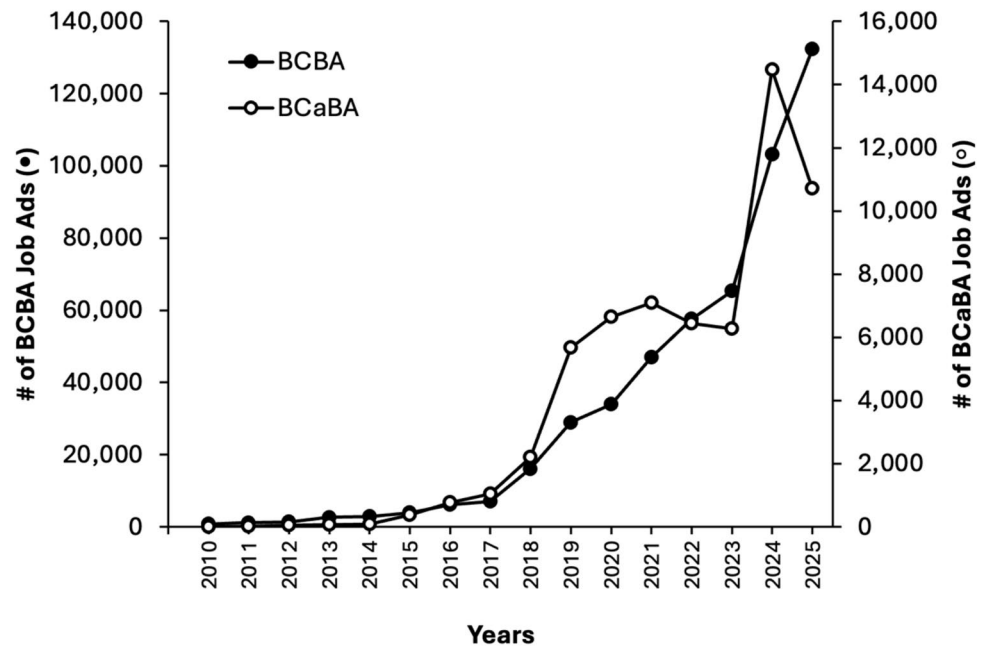


Fig. 2 Visual representation of some core elements of the professional infrastructure that support the ABA profession

profession existed in past decades, one specific initiative appears to have predominantly fueled its recent growth. From 2005 to 2019, an attorney and parent advocate, Lorri Unumb, led a legislative advocacy initiative to pass state legislation requiring private health plans to fund treatment of autism spectrum disorder (including ABA treatment) (Unumb, 2015). Before this initiative, health plans routinely denied coverage for treatment of autism spectrum disorder, claiming that such services should be provided by the educational system. Unumb's work, conducted largely

through the Autism Speaks state government affairs program, helped contribute to the passage of autism insurance legislation in all 50 states by 2019 (Choi et al., 2020). This was an extremely effective legislative initiative, resulting in thousands of families gaining access to treatment for the first time. While this initiative was underway, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (2014) issued guidance to state Medicaid plans clarifying the need to cover treatments for individuals with autism, including ABA treatment.

Fig. 3 The number of unique job ads in the US per year requiring or preferring BCBA or BCaBA certification



The autism insurance reform movement and increased availability of Medicaid-funded services coincided with the rise and expansion of private equity investment in the United States (USA). Private equity involves using private investment capital to purchase and grow companies that can be sold, ideally for a profit, after a relatively brief holding period (e.g., 5 to 7 years) (Borsa et al., 2023; Morris, 2025). Autism insurance reform and increased Medicaid coverage resulted in a large group of patients with access to new funding, but with relatively few available service options. Private equity investment led to the creation and expansion of hundreds of new service organizations across the USA. Recent research shows that between 2015 and 2024, there were 147 private equity-backed acquisitions of autism service organizations involving 574 service delivery sites in the US (Arnold et al., 2026). These new and expanded businesses needed a workforce of behavior analysts and behavior technicians to provide their services, but the available supply was insufficient to meet demand. For example, approximately a decade ago, the demand for Board Certified Behavior Analysts® (BCBAs®) and Board Certified Assistant Behavior Analysts® (BCaBAs®) began to increase dramatically. In 2025, there were more job advertisements in the USA for BCBAs and BCaBAs than there were individuals who had earned those certifications (BACB, 2026a; see Fig. 3).

The increase in demand for workers in recent years, particularly in the autism spectrum disorder subspecialty area, led to the development and expansion of many new behavior-analytic university training programs. For example, using internal BACB data, from 2010 to 2025, the number of US universities offering ABAI-accredited programs or

behavior-analytic course sequences increased from 123 to 179 (45.5% increase). Some newer programs are graduating many hundreds of students each year (BACB, 2025a), an output never before seen in behavior analysis.

The rapid increase and expansion of new university training programs led to a dramatic increase in the size of the behavior-analytic workforce. Figure 4 depicts the annual number of Behavior Analyst Certification Board®³ (BACB®) certificants since the first certifications were awarded in 1999. In the first decade or so, there was slow, modest growth in the workforce. This growth pattern is likely because there were few reasons to become certified at that time, other than out of general support for the profession. However, with each passing year, employers and government and third-party payers increasingly began requiring BACB certification for employment (BACB, 2026a). As of April 2026, there were more than 342,000 BACB certificants (across all certification levels).

Along with the recent increase in funding streams, university training programs, jobs, and BACB certificants, there have been other indicators of growth. For example, in 2009, the first behavior analyst licensure law was enacted in the USA (Oklahoma). By 2026, such laws had been enacted in 40 states and the District of Columbia (BACB, n.d.-a). During this same period, a new national professional membership association was established to support practitioners (Association of Professional Behavior Analysts, APBA), and a new trade association was established to support their

³ The BACB is the oldest certification organization in behavior analysis and currently manages the certifications of approximately 97% of the certified workforce. Thus, the BACB and its data are used in this article to illustrate this space.

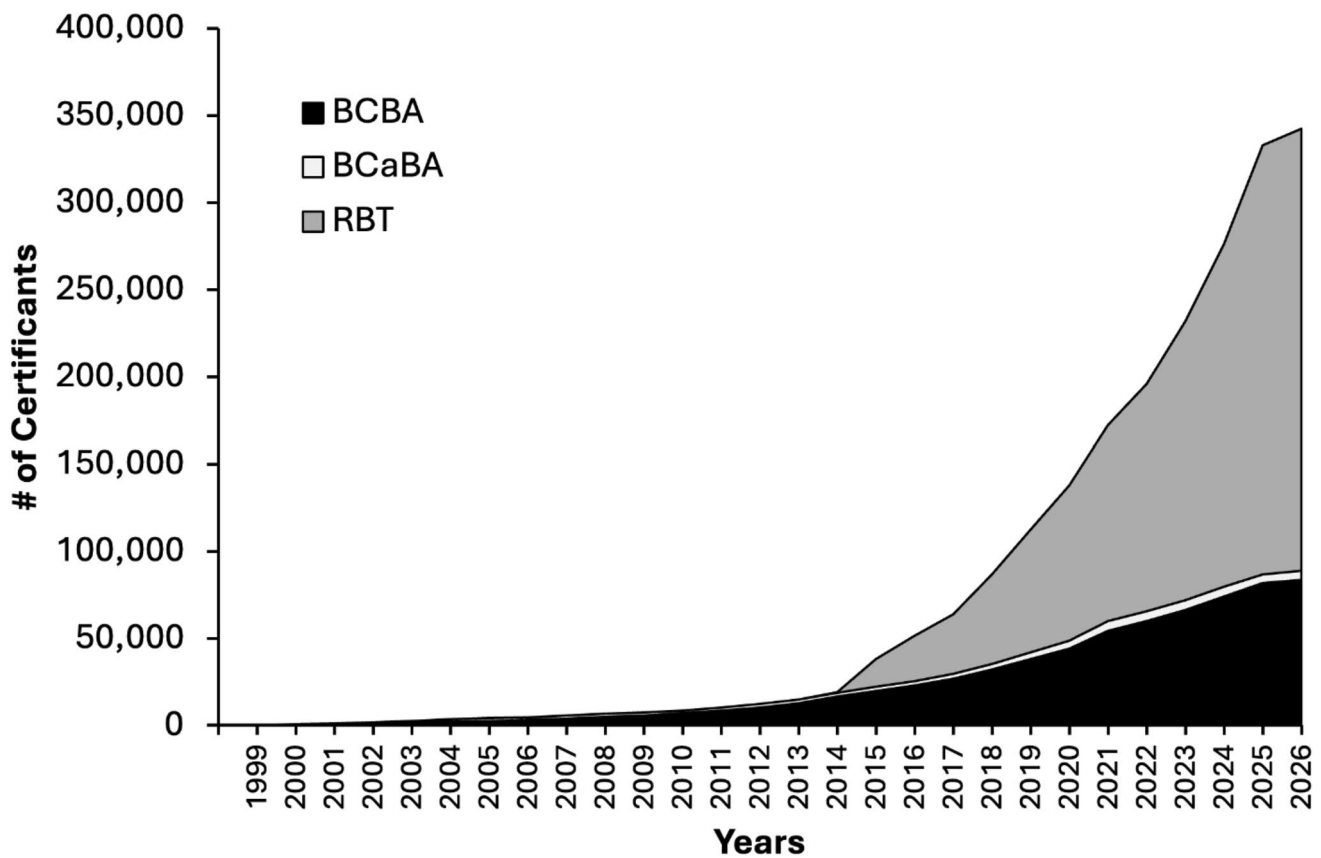


Fig. 4 The total number of BACB certificants per year at each certification level. *Note:* Although the graph may appear to be a cumulative record, each data point reflects only individuals holding an active

certification in that year; individuals whose prior certifications have expired are not included in subsequent years

workplaces (Council of Autism Service Providers, CASP). Taken together, these various metrics and developments illustrate substantial recent growth in our professional landscape, resulting in a profession very different from just a couple of decades ago.

Infrastructure Supporting the ABA Profession

As we indicated previously, the various systems and resources that support a profession constitute its professional infrastructure. The remainder of this article summarizes some of these key elements.

Behavior-Analytic Literature

A critical and early component of a profession's infrastructure is the existence of an established body of knowledge that can serve as the basis for uniform educational standards and service delivery to the public. Peer-reviewed scholarly journals function as repositories of scientific knowledge

and as a method of documenting a discipline or profession's "long past, a short history, and recent origins" (Morris, 2022, p. 776). Within a profession, journals also serve as mechanisms for articulating, evaluating, and disseminating standards of evidence, professional norms, and best practices to practitioners.

The *Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior* (JEAB), established in 1958 by the Society for the Experimental Analysis of Behavior (SEAB), was the first exclusively behavior-analytic journal, and it continues to publish primarily basic and translational research. In 1968, SEAB launched the *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis* (JABA) as a vehicle to publish experimental research addressing socially significant behavior change in applied settings (Laties, 1987). Today, both JABA and JEAB are still considered our "flagship" behavior analysis journals.

As the discipline expanded, additional journals emerged to support conceptual integration and area specialization, further expanding our scholarly infrastructure. *Perspectives on Behavior Science* focuses on publishing theoretical, philosophical, and methodological manuscripts rather than articles about the discipline or profession (Hantula et al.,

2017). Specialty outlets such as the *Journal of Organizational Behavior Management* and *The Analysis of Verbal Behavior* further supported the application of behavior-analytic principles and procedures within specific contexts, including organizations and human language, respectively. Over the years, a broader array of behavior-analytic journals has emerged, further reflecting the maturation and diversification of our scholarship (e.g., *Behavioral Interventions*, *Behavior Analysis: Research and Practice*, *European Journal of Behavior Analysis*, *Journal of Behavioral Education*, and *Behavior and Social Issues*).

A more recent addition to our scientific journals is *Behavior Analysis in Practice* (BAP), which serves as a practice-oriented outlet providing research-based information explicitly for a practitioner audience (ABAI, n.d.-a). The journal's topics include service delivery, supervision, training, ethical decision making, and systems-level challenges faced by practitioners. The development of BAP added an explicitly practitioner-oriented outlet to the profession's publication infrastructure, helping make research-based information more accessible to professional audiences.

Peer-reviewed journal articles constitute the primary source literature of behavior analysis and serve as the empirical foundation for textbooks used in graduate education and training. Over several decades, this literature has served as the foundation for numerous textbooks synthesizing core behavior-analytic concepts and principles (e.g., Catania, 2013; Rasmussen et al., 2022), applied science and practice (e.g., Cooper et al., 2020; Mayer et al., 2018), and research methods (e.g., Bailey & Burch, 2024; Johnston et al., 2019). More recently, perhaps in response to the development and growth of the profession, specialized texts have emerged focusing on topics such as ethics, performance management, supervision, and assessment and intervention practices, important topics for the education and professional preparation of future behavior analysts. This established body of knowledge, represented by peer-reviewed journals and textbooks, is the scholarly infrastructure element that directly informs graduate education and ABA practice.

University Training Programs

University training programs constitute another core component of the infrastructure supporting the ABA profession. In established professions, university-based education serves as the primary mechanism through which a shared body of knowledge is organized into curricula and transmitted to future practitioners. In behavior analysis, the growth of university programs has paralleled the expansion of the profession. As we mentioned previously, the number of institutions offering behavior-analytic coursework has increased substantially over time (Dubuque & Kazemi, 2021), consistent with sustained growth in demand for behavior analysts (BACB, 2026a).

There are currently hundreds of universities that offer educational programs in behavior analysis. Until recently, almost all of these had earned the ABAI Verified Course Sequence (VCS) designation, which signaled to prospective students that the programs met BACB coursework requirements. At the end of 2025, ABAI discontinued the VCS system. The discipline is now entering an era in which university programs seek accreditation as the primary means of recognition.

University-program accreditation is recognition that a program has met a set of explicit standards (e.g., curriculum, faculty) following a rigorous evaluation by a third party (often a professional association). Such systems serve as an important quality-control mechanism for a profession by establishing a benchmark for new and existing programs. Within the ABA profession, two accreditation systems are currently available for university programs in behavior analysis (ABAI and APBA).

ABAI operates the oldest and largest accreditation system in behavior analysis, having accredited its first program in 1993 (ABAI, n.d.-b; Hopkins & Moore, 1993). The purpose of ABAI's accreditation system is to "... accredit exemplary educational programs that train behavior scientists and scientist-practitioners in the experimental and theoretical foundations of behavior analysis and ethical conduct in research, teaching, and evidence-based practice" (ABAI, n.d.-c). ABAI accreditation includes standards for a program's curriculum, administration, faculty, and student support, among other areas (ABAI, n.d.-d). ABAI has awarded accreditation to 38 universities for their bachelors, masters, or doctoral programs (ABAI, n.d.-e). ABAI also offers recognition of university programs that do not fully meet its accreditation standards through its Tiered Model of Education system (ABAI, n.d.-f).

In 2023, APBA introduced a new accreditation system for master's-level university programs. The purpose of APBA accreditation is to "...evaluate degree conferring programs at the master's level that focus on training students to become scientist-practitioners in the profession of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) based services" (APBA, n.d.-a). Like most accreditation programs, APBA's accreditation standards include requirements for curriculum, faculty, resources, and other areas, but all are explicitly designed around practitioner training (APBA, n.d.-b). As APBA's accreditation system has recently been launched, it has not yet accredited any programs.

Together, ABAI and APBA accreditation represent a positive infrastructure development for our profession. Whereas the VCS system of the past merely indicated which universities offered coursework, program accreditation is an actual mark of quality that should help improve the overall state of our university training. This development will be increasingly relevant because, beginning in 2032, the sole

educational requirement for obtaining BCBA certification will be a master's degree from an ABAI- or APBA-accredited program (BACB, 2022).

Professional Associations

Professional associations constitute another core component of the infrastructure supporting the ABA profession. These organizations are typically nonprofit corporations that engage in activities such as professional development for their members, disseminating scholarly and practical resources, networking, representation of professional interests, and public policy. In the ABA profession, professional associations do not regulate practice, credential individuals, or define scopes of practice. Those functions are performed by certification and licensure bodies. In this role, they engage in critical functions such as safeguarding the right to practice through legislative advocacy, disseminating accurate information about the profession, and providing high-quality professional development resources (e.g., practice guidelines, position statements) and events (e.g., conventions, conferences).

At the national level, organizations such as ABAI and APBA play distinct but complementary roles within our infrastructure. ABAI has historically emphasized the advancement of the science and dissemination of behavior analysis through conferences, journals, and scholarly communities, whereas APBA has focused more explicitly on the needs of practitioners and service delivery organizations, including workforce development, policy engagement, and applied professional resources.

Regional and state associations further extend this infrastructure by supporting behavior analysts within specific geographic contexts. Some of these associations are affiliated with ABAI (as chapters) and APBA (as affiliates). These organizations are often active and critically important in developing and maintaining local public policy matters (e.g., licensure, funding). They also facilitate locally relevant continuing education and professional networking and disseminate up-to-date information to members. In addition, specialty membership organizations—such as those focused on specific populations, practice areas, or professional identities (e.g., OBM-focused groups, leadership collectives, or affinity-based associations)—reflect increasing differentiation within the profession and provide targeted forums for collaboration and professional growth.

Professional Credentials

As mentioned earlier, professional credentials are a defining feature of professions. A professional credential is a designation awarded by an organization or governmental entity to an individual who has met specified eligibility requirements and,

in most cases, passed a psychometrically sound examination. Credentials serve an essential consumer-protection function by establishing educational and experiential standards, verifying entry-level competence through an examination, publishing ethical requirements, and providing disciplinary mechanisms for professional misconduct. In addition to their consumer-protection role, credentials enable practitioners to communicate their professional identity efficiently. Professional credentials encompass both private certification and governmental licensure (Green & Johnston, 2009).

Certification Private certification (hereafter referred to as “certification”) is a professional credential granted by a non-governmental organization. Certification is often described as voluntary, particularly compared with licensure, which is mandatory for most practitioners in a region. However, certification may function as a practical requirement when mandated for employment, reimbursement, or licensure eligibility. The leading certification organization in the ABA profession is the BACB, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation founded in 1998.⁴ The BACB was established to develop national professional certifications in behavior analysis at a time when neither national certification nor state licensure systems existed (Johnston & Shook, 2001; Johnston et al., 2017). The organization began offering the BCBA (master's level) and BCaBA (bachelor's level) certifications in 1999, followed by the Registered Behavior Technician® (RBT®; high-school level) certification in 2014. All BACB certification programs are accredited by the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA; Institute for Credentialing Excellence, n.d.), which establishes national standards for the development and administration of professional certification programs.

The primary mechanism the BACB uses to establish and revise certification standards is through committees of subject matter experts selected from the profession, an NCCA requirement (BACB, 2026b; Johnston et al., 2014). Thus, the BACB's requirements are set by samples from the profession rather than by BACB personnel. All of the BACB's certification programs include eligibility requirements (e.g., coursework, fieldwork), passage of a psychometrically sound examination, adherence to ethics standards, post-certification maintenance requirements, and disciplinary mechanisms for misconduct. As with all credentialing programs, only individuals who have earned a BACB certification are permitted to use its designations (e.g., BCBA, RBT).

Licensure State licensure shares many structural similarities with certification. Both credentialing systems typically

⁴ Several other small corporations offer certifications in behavior analysis. These are either autism-focused, for-profit, internationally oriented, or some combination of these elements.

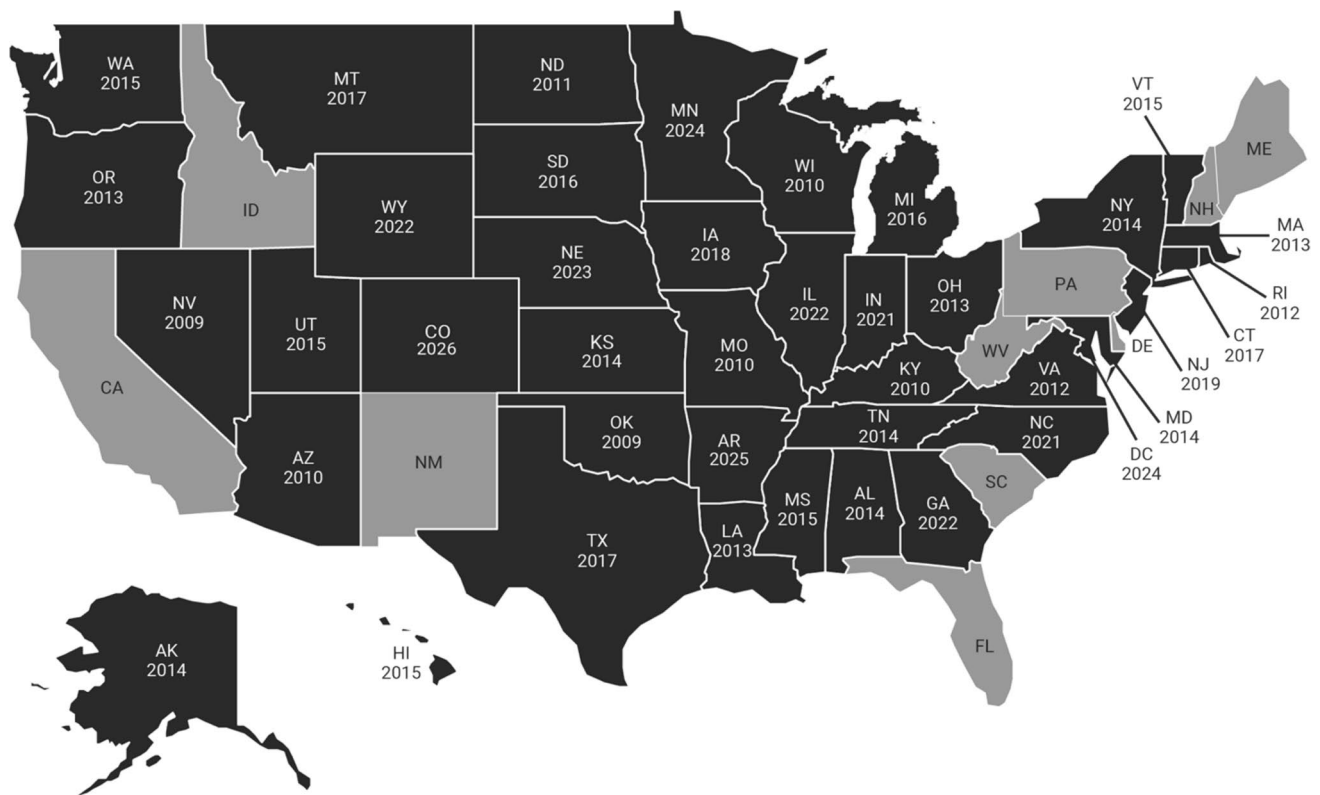


Fig. 5 United States map depicting states that have passed laws to license behavior analysts (black) and those that have not (gray). *Note:* Figure obtained from BACB (n.d.-a)

require specified educational and experiential qualifications, passage of an examination, adherence to ethical standards, maintenance requirements, and disciplinary procedures. However, licensure differs from certification with respect to governance and legal authority. Licensure is established through state law and administered by a governmental regulatory body (e.g., a licensure board), whereas certification programs are typically administered by private corporations.

An important connection between certification and licensure in behavior analysis is the reliance on a common set of ethics standards. The BACB uses the Ethics Code for Behavior Analysts (BACB, 2020) as the basis for its disciplinary system for BCBAs and BCaBAs, and US behavior-analyst licensure programs similarly rely on the same code for regulating licensee conduct (BACB, 2025b). Thus, although certification and licensure are administered by different entities with different sources of authority, their disciplinary systems are grounded in the same profession-wide ethics standards.

Licensure laws generally include two additional components. First, many statutes protect professional titles (e.g., “licensed behavior analyst”), limiting their use to individuals who hold the license. Second, many licensure laws include a definition of the activities a professional may legally perform if they are competent; this definition is referred to as a “scope

of practice⁵” (Morris et al., 2024). One of the benefits of licensure is that licensure boards often have authority over *all individuals practicing behavior analysis*, whereas certification organizations such as the BACB only have jurisdiction over *their own certificants*. In addition to the ability to revoke and suspend licenses, a power also exercised by certification boards, licensure boards may issue civil and criminal sanctions for misconduct, raising the stakes for licensees with more severe consequences. In states with licensure laws, individuals who practice behavior analysis are typically required to obtain licensure, even if they hold BACB certification, unless explicitly exempted (e.g., certain faculty positions or nonclinical roles such as organizational behavior management). The requirement to obtain a license often applies to individuals who provide services or supervise via telehealth within a state, even if they reside in a different state.

Oklahoma became the first state to license behavior analysts in 2009. By 2026, 40 states and the District of Columbia enacted licensure laws for behavior analysts (BACB, n.d.-a; Fig. 5). BCBA and BCaBA certificants meet the core eligibility requirements in existing licensure laws (BACB, 2025b).

⁵ A licensure law’s *scope of practice* should not be confused with an individual’s *scope of competence*, the aspects of a profession in which they are personally competent (Brodhead et al., 2018).

Whether licensure will ultimately be established in all 50 states remains uncertain. Whereas behavior analysts have passed licensure laws in 40 states over a 17-year period, by comparison, psychology and speech-language pathology took 30 and 46 years, respectively, to pass licensure laws in all 50 states. These historical trajectories suggest that nationwide licensure, if achieved, may require sustained legislative and professional efforts over an extended period. Even after a licensure law is passed within a state, it may need to be amended at some point to address changes in the profession and monitored for amendments submitted by others (Bourland et al., 2025).

Continuing Education

One of the defining features of a profession is a shared, evolving body of knowledge that guides practice. In ABA, this knowledge base is not static; it is continually refined through ongoing research and developments in service delivery. Thus, practitioners must engage in sustained efforts to update and expand their competence over time. This responsibility extends beyond initial training and requires active participation in ongoing professional development activities. For example, the Ethics Code for Behavior Analysts, Standard 1.06 (Maintaining Competence) requires that “Behavior analysts actively engage in professional development activities to maintain and further their professional competence” (BACB, 2020, p. 9).

One mechanism for supporting continued competence is mandated continuing education. For example, the BACB requires BCBAs and BCaBAs to earn 32 and 20 continuing education units (CEUs), respectively, during each two-year certification cycle.⁶ The BACB (2025c) defines the purpose of these CEU requirements as ensuring that certificants “... continue to engage in activities that expand their behavior-analytic skills beyond the requirements for initial certification and help them stay up to date on developments in the profession” (p. 2). Although BACB certificants may earn CEUs through activities such as teaching and scholarly contributions, the vast majority of CEUs are earned through didactic experiences such as conference presentations and webinars.

To support ongoing continuing education requirements, the BACB established the Authorized Continuing Education (ACE) Provider system in 2002. The system designates individuals and organizations that meet BACB standards for delivering continuing education, helping certificants identify activities that satisfy CEU requirements. ACE Providers must meet BACB-established

requirements for content, instructor qualifications, and administrative procedures, including maintaining attendance records and issuing CEU certificates. In addition, ACE Providers are subject to ongoing oversight, including audits and renewal requirements, to ensure continued compliance. Individuals can use the online ACE Provider Verification Registry to verify the ACE status of CE providers (BACB, n.d.-b).

Trade Associations and Service-Organization Accreditation

The growth of ABA services has also created a need for infrastructure that supports service organizations. Some of these supports are directed at service organizations rather than individual practitioners and address matters such as organizational operations, payer relations, and public policy. Two examples of professional infrastructure that provide support and resources to provider organizations are trade associations and service-organization accreditation bodies.

Trade associations are formal, voluntary membership organizations designed to represent and advance the shared business and operational interests of organizations operating within a defined sector (Lawton et al., 2018). CASP is the primary trade association in the ABA profession. CASP is a 501(c)(6) nonprofit corporation founded in 2016 with over 400 autism service provider organization members representing all 50 US states and several countries (CASP, n.d.-a). Its stated mission is to support its members “by cultivating, sharing, and advocating for provider best practices in autism services” (CASP, n.d.-b). CASP engages with government agencies, payers, and the public on behalf of ABA service provider organizations and works to set standards of care directly linked to high-quality, effective services. A central resource illustrating CASP’s role in the profession’s infrastructure is their practice guidelines document, *Applied Behavior Analysis Practice Guidelines for the Treatment of Autism Spectrum Disorder* (Version 3.0) (CASP, 2024). These guidelines are based on best available scientific evidence and practice standards and address domains relevant to service systems in the ABA profession (e.g., staffing/delivery models, training, outcome measures, and state/federal policy considerations).

Another form of important support within the ABA profession is the accreditation of service organizations. Similar to university program accreditation, service-organization accreditation helps improve quality by awarding accreditation to organizations that have met established quality standards after a thorough review. The Autism Commission on Quality (ACQ) was founded by CASP in 2022 to develop and implement organizational standards intended to improve the quality, effectiveness, and outcomes of ABA services (CASP, n.d.-c). ACQ accreditation standards are

⁶ Similarly, RBTs must earn 12 Professional Development Units every two years, which may be obtained as Authorized Continuing Education events or as in-service trainings provided by BCBAs or BCaBAs at their placement of employment.

described in its Applied Behavior Analysis Accreditation Program Standards and Guide (version 1.0) and are organized into multiple sections addressing organizational functions such as business operations, human resources, financial operations, and risk management, among other areas (ACQ, n.d.).

Funding-Related Infrastructure

Other key elements of the ABA profession's infrastructure are the systems through which services are reimbursed (i.e., the payers). For decades, many ABA services have been funded by state government agencies and school districts. More recently, particularly in the USA, ABA services are increasingly billed to private health insurers and state Medicaid programs as healthcare services. This shift places practitioners within a complex healthcare reimbursement system with which they must become familiar. We briefly describe two important components of that system: unique identification codes for practitioners and billing codes used to identify the services and procedures they provide.

NPI Numbers The National Provider Identifier (NPI) is a standardized, 10-digit identifier required for health care providers engaged in billing under the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA). NPIs are issued by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services and are used in conjunction with occupational taxonomy codes maintained by the National Uniform Claim Committee (NUCC, n.d.), which classifies providers by type, specialty, and subspecialty (i.e., the Health Care Provider Taxonomy Code Set). Individual providers apply for an individual NPI number under a specific NUCC taxonomy code.

In 2008, the NUCC added a code for Behavior Analyst to its taxonomy. In 2015, the BACB and APBA submitted a formal application to update the Behavior Analyst definition and add codes for Assistant Behavior Analyst and Behavior Technician. The rationale for this application was to obtain a taxonomy code set that more closely aligned with credentialing levels and service-delivery roles within the profession. The application was accepted, and in 2016, the NUCC published the updated taxonomy codes for Behavior Analyst (103K00000X), Assistant Behavior Analyst (106E00000X), and Behavior Technician (106S00000X) (NUCC, n.d.).

Given the importance of NPI numbers in healthcare reimbursement systems, individuals entering professional practice, particularly those involved in medical billing, should obtain an NPI early in their careers. The NPI application is available at the National Plan and Provider Enumeration System (n.d.) website. The application is free and only requires attestation of eligibility.

CPT Codes In the USA, healthcare billing is based on the Current Procedural Terminology (CPT®) system, a set of five-digit numeric codes maintained by the American Medical Association (AMA, n.d.) to standardize the documentation and reimbursement of healthcare services. These codes function as a shared language between providers and payers, enabling consistent reporting of clinical activities and facilitating payment for services. In most cases, services are billed in time-based units (e.g., 15-min increments), with specific codes corresponding to distinct clinical activities.

Prior to 2014, ABA lacked a dedicated CPT code set. As a result, providers relied on a heterogeneous collection of generic or nonspecific codes that were not designed to capture the full scope of ABA services. This approach produced considerable variability across states and payers, such that identical services were billed differently depending on location or funding source. The absence of standardized codes contributed to inconsistent reimbursement practices and limited the ability to systematically track service utilization at a national level.

In 2012, ABAA's Practice Board applied to the AMA to establish a set of CPT codes specific to ABA services. The application was approved, and in 2014, the AMA published an initial set of temporary codes under the category "adaptive behavior services." After this initial publication, ABAA collaborated with APBA, Autism Speaks, and the BACB to submit a code-change application to the AMA to refine the code set and seek their conversion to permanent status. The revised code set was approved by the AMA in 2019. The resulting code set captures the primary components of ABA service delivery, including assessment, direct treatment, protocol modification, and caregiver training. In addition, two temporary codes address specialized services for severe problem behavior requiring intensive staffing and oversight. In 2025, several organizations (including APBA, ABAA, CASP, and the BACB) submitted another code-change application to further revise the code set and convert the two remaining temporary codes to permanent status. The AMA approved the application and published the revised code set in late 2026. This family of CPT codes now serves as the primary mechanism for billing ABA services in most healthcare systems.

Because CPT codes are instrumental to healthcare billing in the USA, it behooves new practitioners to have at least a rudimentary familiarity with them and the billing process, even though billing is often managed by nonclinical staff in many organizations. The website of the ABA Coding Coalition (n.d.), a collaboration between ABAA, APBA, CASP, and the BACB, includes the current code set, FAQs, and other helpful implementation resources. The ABA Coding Coalition is the profession's primary support system for CPT codes and their proper implementation.

Conclusion

The ABA profession has undergone extraordinary growth during the past two decades. That growth has been accompanied by the development of much of the professional infrastructure described in this article. Despite this growth, it is important to recognize that the profession remains relatively immature. The pace of recent growth has been remarkable, with the workforce expanding by several decades' worth of growth in a comparatively short period. Although many elements of professional infrastructure have emerged during this same timeframe, they have not all reached a steady state. As a result, practitioners are likely to encounter gaps in professional supports that are routinely available in more established professions. These gaps may include the absence of practice guidelines in several areas, uneven access to funding across ABA subspecialty areas, and variability in training quality.

Many practitioners enter the profession without a clear understanding of this context. Consequently, the absence of certain supports can be confusing or frustrating. Many of these limitations reflect the fact that the ABA profession has grown faster than some of its supporting infrastructure. Despite the large number of credentialed practitioners, many professional organizations remain comparatively small and have limited resources relative to the scope of the needs they address.

Further development of this infrastructure will require participation from members of the profession. Many parts of this infrastructure will require continued development, including university training, accreditation, professional resources, and the organizations that support practitioners and service organizations. Understanding this infrastructure should help behavior analysts identify where additional professional supports are needed and where they can contribute to their development.

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Declarations

Ethics Approval This is a discussion article.

Conflict of interest The first author is employed by the BACB and serves as the President of SEAB, two organizations discussed in this manuscript. The second author was employed by the BACB from 2018 through 2021.

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