

CWA Certifications: What You Need To Know

June 16, 2023

in [CWA Blog](#)



Over a decade ago, with the introduction and evolution of indoor climbing gyms, there was a recognition that not all facilities operate in the same way. Industry stakeholders got together to determine standards and guidelines for the operations of facilities for the industry as a whole. This process initially looked to the outdoor climbing world where instructors needed to meet a certification standard, there was also a recognition for the need to create a standard for those instructing within the indoor climbing world.

Folks from the [American Mountain Guides Association \(AMGA\)](#) and the CWA sat together and began a process of determining what minimum standards an instructor should be able to meet to become certified.

These meetings and collaborations eventually led to the birth of the CWI Top Rope Endorsement and the CWI Lead Endorsement, and a designation for CWI Providers who would prepare and assess candidates, determining whether a CWI Candidate received certification.

Certification

- Training happens when folks are introduced to new information and have an opportunity to practice those skills
- Learning happens when folks use the newly gained information in the context of their real-world experience
- Certification happens when someone demonstrates the ability to meet a standard competency level

An Intro to Climbing course provides new climbers with the technical climbing skills they need to manage ropes and climb walls using personal protective equipment (PPE).

Learning happens when the learner uses the equipment and practices managing ropes and the

climbing skills introduced. Certification is possible when the candidate demonstrates a multitude of skills in a manner that is deemed competent. A certification standard for an instructor for example, goes beyond being able to demonstrate climbing skill. It includes being able to identify risks, intervene with those risks, and instruct skills.



Certification means the certified person, at a particular moment in time, demonstrated competency in the skills described by the certification standard. Organizations will use certification as a means of affirming competency. Insurance companies see it as a record of someone's competency to do the job expected of them, and this can lead to savings on premiums and deductibles.

Certification does not guarantee that the person will never be harmed, nor that any of their students will be harmed.

Evolution of the Program

During the past decade, the indoor climbing world has seen several evolutions: new equipment on the market, new wall builders, local governments becoming more aware of the operations of climbing facilities, and tremendous growth in the number of participants. As the wheels of exponential growth have spun, there has been an even greater demand for employees.

When the CWA started certifying instructors, most climbing gym employees had some knowledge or experience with climbing. Most climbers coming into gyms 10 years ago were folks with some degree of experience. The exponential growth of the sport over these 10 years has meant the users today often have no previous experience with climbing activities and climbing gyms are hiring staff with little to no experience in relation to climbing activities, so more education is needed, and certifications help ensure that appropriate knowledge is being taught and retained.

There is a big difference between being a climber in an indoor climbing gym and being the

person responsible for monitoring climbing activities. Whether it is access, instruction, communication, and/or risk management, the folks overseeing climbing activities have a duty to the climbers using the facility. That duty includes three primary responsibilities:

1. Ensuring the client is aware of risks and willing to accept them
2. Intervening where necessary to ensure the users follow the rules, policies and etiquette
3. Educating the client on their personal responsibility for their safety and those around them

The decrease in the experience of new employees increases the amount of knowledge they may need to understand. Coupled with the increase in the number of inexperienced newcomers to the sport, especially since climbing debuted in the 2020 Olympics, has created a perfect storm in the risk of operating a climbing gym. To this end, the CWA has responded with a revision to the CWI Program.

READ ALSO: Why We Need Certification Programs

The [CWA Certification Standards Committee](#) has spent the last three years reviewing the CWI Program and revising the program standards to meet this new post-Covid, post-Olympic reality.

Covid pushed the world toward the possibilities of online meetings and course opportunities. Leveraging this technology, the CWA has utilized online course software to create a blended learning environment and with the virtual learning environment, providing new opportunities and platforms to prepare candidates for CWI Certification.

The new CWA Community Hub will allow the CWA and members of the indoor climbing community to continue to evolve more seamlessly as our industry continues to grow.

Faced with this changing ecosystem, the CWA Certification Standards Committee endeavored to meet the following needs of climbing facilities:

1. Offer training and certification to younger employees 16-17 years of age
2. Offer certification pertinent to bouldering-only facilities
3. Offer instruction, in multi-teaching approaches including virtual media, in-person assessments, and online learning
4. Continue instruction of more content to better prepare newer climbers for certification
5. Maintain the same or less time required by providers to deliver the content
6. Improve the consistency in the program content and assessment
7. Improve the documentation of certification criteria records
8. Make the certification more accessible, particularly in regions without access to providers

9. Allow CWI candidates to engage more directly with the CWA
10. Provide more resources to CWIs and Providers

What Does the New Program Look Like?

The CWA has created an online course for all folks new to the CWA and the CWI Program called the CWA Foundations Course. The goal of this content is to explain the role of the CWA in the indoor climbing industry and to provide some very foundational climbing terminology for folks new to the industry.

The CWI Level 1 Certification is ideal for climbing industry employees that are new to climbing.

The learner is introduced to the responsibilities associated with working in a climbing facility, including the offering of a participant agreement, creating a welcoming environment, monitoring climbing activities, and offering orientations, as well as, ensuring the client understands and is willing to accept the risks associated with climbing activities. Two primary elements of risk management are introduced – identifying risks and intervening with those risks. In addition, the course introduces skills to empower strong communication skills with climbers of all experience levels. The primary focus of the technical climbing skills at this level of endorsement regarding bouldering activities.

The CWI Level 2 Certification introduces climbing-at-heights which requires the use of ropes and more PPE.

Reinforcing the knowledge offered in the CWI Level 1 Certification, this course focuses on the technical skills and knowledge required to use auto belays and to climb using a top rope system. Given the nature of the increased severity of falls, the content reinforces identifying and intervening with risks, as well as prioritizing risks. The learner begins to appreciate the necessity for discernment in the intervention process.

CWI Level 2 Certified Instructors are additionally expected to be able to organize the content for a learn-to-rope-climb course and work with a variety of clients and their varied learning styles.

The CWI Level 3 Certification is designed for those who have experience as a lead climber and/or are experienced climbing gym employees.

- Monitor unroped and roped climbing in a facility
- Offer quality instruction of lead climbing skills
- Evaluate and intervene with risks during climbing activities

Lead climbing requires the participants to continually assess the risks present when climbing

and weigh the possible choices to reduce the likelihood and the potential consequence when risk is present. This requires a broad understanding of the mechanics of rope management, weight differences, physics pertinent to fall forces, and equipment ratings.

The CWI Provider has been more clearly defined in terms of what exactly to instruct and how to assess the competency of each of the three levels of CWI Certifications. Watching someone prepare and teach content is a skillful method of assessing how well they know the content, how well they can adapt to a different teaching environment and different learning styles within the group, and the risks that may be presented when teaching. Providers also assess the degree of professionalism the candidates exhibit.

The CWI Provider Certification Program now offers support to providers in maintaining the documentation of CWI Candidates and offers access to the online CWA Community Hub for ongoing professional development.

What's Next

Since May 2023, the CWA has endeavored to reach out to our currently certified CWIs and Providers to offer a free update to their certification and an opportunity to engage with the new online learning platform via the CWA Community Hub. CWIs and Providers who commit the time to the course materials have access to the following.

- New course content and materials, including:
- New engaging interactive content on climbing equipment, activities
- New engaging and interactive content on instructional strategies
- Expanded content on risk management specific to various climbing activities
- Updated Student Manuals
- Policy Manuals
- Assessment instruments and a Provider Playbook on the administrative process, to guide the process following certification
- Instructional and course planning tools
- Access to the newly launched CWA Community Hub where they can go to join in discussions on forums with the CWA community on operational considerations, trending industry topics, and professional development. The CWA Community Hub also offers access to the CWA blog and resources for personal and business growth.

Currently, Certified CWIs and Providers are encouraged to login and access the CWI Certification and CWI Provider Update courses, to participate in the more robust and detailed CWI Program. The CWI Program Update courses are free if completed by the end of August and provide CWIs with the new endorsement designation for the following three years.

Upon completion of the CWI Course Update content, each CWIs and Providers are awarded a certificate available on the CWA Community Hub. in the form of a blue badge with red star(s). When the participant clicks on the star, they can generate a pdf copy of their certificate with the new endorsement clearly outlined and the expiry date.

Those who choose not to update their current certification and let their certification expire will be required to enroll in the new course content in the future if they wish to maintain certification, at full cost.

The CWA will continue to use this online course platform to offer new and expanded professional development opportunities to our CWI Program participants. The Certification Standards Committee is identifying potential pathways for re-certification which provide opportunities for expanded learning or continuing education.

We are very excited about these new changes and hope you are too.

Learn More from Heather in a CWI Certification Course!

Entering 2023, Heather Reynolds spearheaded a redesign of the CWI offerings through the CWA. Don't miss your chance to get certified and take the next step in your career.

About The Author



Heather Reynolds is a licensed kinesiologist, High Five Trainer (Sport, PCHD), CEC Climbing Coach, CWA Climbing Wall Instructor Certification Provider Trainer. She works as a Consultant to the CWA. She blends her knowledge of movement, physiology, and education to develop a multitude of successful climbing programs designed to support and engage youth. Having worked with youth for over 30 years as a recreation instructor, leader and educator, Heather supports the values and expertise available in the High Five Program, bringing quality assurance to youth-based sport and

recreation programming.



CHALLENGES TO OPENING AN INDOOR CLIMBING GYM

July 3, 2023

CASE STUDY: HOW TO FIGHT BACK AGAINST A GYM SHUTDOWN



June 16, 2023