



License and Certification: A Discussion

The terms “license” and “certification” are often used interchangeably, but there are major differences. CBDCE has a [position statement on licensure](#), but below is some general information about each concept:

License	Certification
Non-voluntary	Voluntary Certifications are generally voluntary but, in some instances, are considered part of a licensing process.
Licensing is always based on the action of a legislative body. Once a licensing law has been passed it becomes illegal for anyone to engage in that occupation unless he or she has a license. The health professions are typically licensed at the state and/or local level, but not usually at the federal level.	Nearly always offered by a private, non-governmental agency. Such agencies are usually outgrowths of professional associations which create certifying agencies to identify and acknowledge those who have met a standard.
Licenses are mandated through regulatory or government agencies.	In some cases, professional certification is a requirement for employment, even when a state license is not necessary or are considered part of a licensing process (as noted above).
Licenses define the title and scope of practice. (Note: A scope of practice defines what an individual may do – not what they may not do.)	Certifications outline the skills and knowledge related to the specialty through their requirements and the content included on their examination (usually based on a job/practice analysis).
Licenses grant permission to an individual to engage in an occupation.	Certification sets standards, educates practitioners and informs the public. It may, however, be used to establish entry to a profession if combined with state laws.
Usually entry level for a profession – typically result of an academic path.	Mastery level – Experience in the specialty is required to obtain the knowledge and ability to apply that knowledge.
Licensure grants permission to an individual if it finds that the applicant has attained the degree of competency required to ensure the public health, safety, and welfare will be reasonably protected.	A certification is the recognition of an individual who has demonstrated through a standardized assessment that they meet defined qualifications within a profession. Professional certification uses a formal process to identify and acknowledge individuals who have met a recognized standard. Usually this standard includes education, experience, and an exam of knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to perform the job. When an individual meets the standard, he or she receives certification from a certifying agency.
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<p>Requirements can vary from state to state. Licensure boards are responsible for setting their own standards and procedures in individual states. This can mean that the path to licensing may be easier in some places than in others, or that someone is eligible for licensing in one state but not in another. It also means that working in more than one state will likely require more than one license.</p>	<p>Normally national focus – consistent requirements on a national basis, including passing an examination.</p> <p>The credibility and integrity of the certifying agency determines whether the agency’s certification means anything to the field, and therefore, ultimately, its value. Generally, this standard involves the qualification requirements to take the exam, whether the exam meets accepted psychometric standards for exam development, how the exam is given and scored, how the agency is administered, and whether its rules are fair.</p>
<p>A license involves the police power of the state. That is, if one violates the licensing law, either by acting without a license, or failing to uphold the rules governing the license privilege, one is subject to prosecution under the civil or criminal laws of the governing body.</p>	<p>Certification organizations typically maintain codes or canons of ethical conduct that hold their certificants to various standards.</p>
	<p>Board certification is important because it keeps the specialty up to date and the health professional who is certified has taken the additional steps to provide quality care and made a commitment to learning in order to maintain their certification.</p> <p>Certification provides the consumer with more information about a practitioner. It also gives practitioners a way to increase their competency through experience and preparing for exams, and to advertise or inform others of their completion of this course of study.</p>
	<p>Note: Do not confuse the word “certification”, which is a credential that demonstrates professional qualifications, with a “certificate” that someone might receive upon completion of an academic or continuing education program.</p>
<p>Example: A registered nurse must have a license to legally practice as a nurse. To get licensed, there are several educational pathways, but a nurse must pass the standardized National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX)-RN and meet the other state requirements. Once the person is licensed as a RN, she/he may go on to become certified in any number of different specialties.</p>	<p>A board-certified nurse has met the licensure requirements as a RN, plus has obtained training/work experience and passes the examination beyond what's required for a license. Board certification, unlike most licenses, is specialty specific.</p>