

# CERTIFICATION vs. CERTIFICATE: Do You Know the Difference?

Have you ever felt overwhelmed by advertisements for certification and certificate programs? Do you find yourself unsure of what exactly these programs are offering? Proposals for programs providing certification or certificates abound, and it can be confusing to understand what a program confers. Both professional organizations and educational companies use the words certification and certificate frequently, sometimes interchangeably. Understanding the differences between these two options is essential to you as a consumer of educational services and for the protection of the public.

**Certification**, like the CRNI® designation, refers to an earned credential that demonstrates the holder's specialized knowledge, skills, and experience. Certification is awarded by a third-party, nongovernmental entity such as the Infusion Nurses Certification Corporation (INCC). A separate organization from INS, INCC was created specifically to develop a certification program that promotes public protection.

It does so by employing strict eligibility criteria and administering a legally defensible and psychometrically sound exam. The CRNI® exam questions are based on in-depth analyses of the role and responsibilities of the infusion nurse, ensuring the exam is relevant to clinical practice.

Certification candidates receive their credential only after meeting strict eligibility criteria and successfully completing a standardized exam. Credentials are

nationally recognized and portable, meaning your credentials will follow you if you move from one organization to another. And unlike certificate programs, professional certification programs include ongoing requirements that must be met to keep the certification current. The recertification process ensures that credential holders have maintained a level of expertise in their specialty and that they participate in activities that support competency in their specialty.

For more information on CRNI® recertification requirements, visit the INCC website at [www.incc1.org](http://www.incc1.org).

A **certificate program** is an educational program that awards a certificate after completing the program. Certificate programs are usually open to anyone who applies, and they are geared toward obtaining specific skills or knowledge. While certificate programs may award a certificate of attendance or participation, they do not award a credential.

Some healthcare organizations promote their own internal "credential" programs that teach nurses specific skills or procedures. Usually the organization that offers these certificates designs the program to meet its own internal criteria, and the programs involve a combination of classes and an exam or practicum. Unlike a program certified by an independent, third-party agency, these certificates apply only to practice within the organization that offers the certificate. This certificate is not nationally recognized, and it will not follow you from one organization to another.

## How a Certification Exam is Different

The end-of-course exams that some certificate programs require participants to complete are very different from a certification exam. The organization offering the certificate determines the course content and the exam questions while certification exams that result in a credential are standardized exams based on national studies of job analyses and nursing roles. The exams are administered in a secure and proctored environment, and they undergo regular statistical psychometric analyses that measure the fairness and difficulty of the exam questions.



The CRNI® exam is accredited by the Accreditation Board for Specialty Nursing Certification (**ABSNC**) and the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (**NCCA**). Both organizations set rigorous standards for the accreditation of specialty nursing certification and advocate for consumer protection. For more on their standards of certification, visit [www.nursingcertification.org](http://www.nursingcertification.org) (ABSNC) and [www.credentialingexcellence.org](http://www.credentialingexcellence.org) (NCCA).

