

AHA Certification vs. Certificate Programs: What Are the Differences and What Do They Mean for You?

Certificate program. Certification program. The names sound similar, but the features of these programs and the benefits they provide are quite different. Understanding the differences between certificate and certification programs will help you make an informed decision about which program will best meet your professional development needs and could save you time and money.

What is a Certificate Program?

Certificate programs provide instruction and training to aid participants in achieving specific learning outcomes. There are two general categories of certificate programs. The first is programs which award a certificate *only* after participants have demonstrated, through the successful completion of an assessment, that they have accomplished the learning outcomes of the education or training. These are referred to as “assessment-based certificate programs” to distinguish them from the second category of certificate programs, which do not require that participants complete an assessment to confirm they have accomplished the learning outcomes. Instead, these types of programs simply provide participants with a “certificate of attendance” or “certificate of participation” upon completion of the education or training.

How is a Certificate Program Different from Certification?

The primary purpose is instruction/training. The intent of a certificate program is to provide instruction and training to aid participants in acquiring specific knowledge, skills, or competencies. By contrast, the primary purpose of a certification program is to assess knowledge, skills or competencies that candidates are expected to have already mastered prior to applying for the program. Certification programs do not provide the instruction and training through which candidates acquire the knowledge, skills, or competencies required to become certified.

Assessment is tied to a specific course or program. If assessments are used in a certificate program, they are intended to evaluate whether you have acquired the narrow scope of knowledge, skills or competencies that are the focus of the program. And the assessments are created by the provider of the program. The assessments conducted by a certification program are independent of any class, course, or other education or training program and are designed to confirm that you possess a broad range of knowledge and skills required to perform a specific occupational or professional role or job function competently.

The program is completed when the certificate is awarded. A certificate program is complete once the certificate is awarded; whereas, certification is an ongoing process. Certified individuals are required to engage in specified activities, such as continuing education or re-examination, on a routine basis in order to maintain their certification.

No designation is awarded. Although some certificate programs award designations or acronyms or letters for certificate recipients to use after their names to reference the certificate they hold, this practice has been criticized as contributing to the considerable confusion about the distinction between certificate and certification programs. Consequently, the practice of awarding designations or acronyms or letters for use after one’s name has been prohibited by a recently published standard for certificate programs (*ANSI/NOCA 1100 – Standard for Assessment-Based Certificate Programs*).

What are the Benefits of Each Type of Program?

Perhaps the most important and distinctive benefit of a certificate program (as compared to certification) is that it provides education and training. If you are trying to develop particular knowledge and skills, a certificate program provides you with the means of doing so. An assessment-based certificate program has an added advantage in that it helps you to evaluate whether you have succeeded in acquiring the knowledge and skills the program was designed to provide.

The key benefit of certification is that provides an independent, third-party confirmation of your knowledge and skills. The certification process also verifies that you have other important qualifications, such as an academic degree and work experience in your field.

How Do I Know Which Program is Right for Me?

The table below will help you determine which type of program is best for accomplishing your professional development goals.

Professional Development Goal	Certification	Assessment-Based Certificate	Certificate of Attendance/ Participation
You (or your employer) want to verify that you have the necessary knowledge/skills to perform a professional role or job function	√		
You want to have your job-related knowledge/skills validated by an independent, third-party organization	√		
You want to obtain more in-depth knowledge or greater skills in an area in which you already have some expertise		√	√
You want to acquire entirely new knowledge/skills		√	√
You (or your employer) want to confirm that a particular education/training program has been effective in helping you to acquire knowledge/skills		√	
You want to get feedback on your progress in achieving the learning outcomes associated with a particular education/training program		√	

How Can I Tell if a Certificate or Certification Program is “Legitimate”?

For both certificate and certification programs, there are high-quality and low-quality options from which to choose. Some of the lower-quality options are completely bogus, providing a certificate or certification to anyone who pays the required fees. You may have heard stories about persons who have debunked bogus programs by obtaining a certificate or certification in their pet’s name.

A “legitimate” certification or assessment-based certificate is one which requires that you successfully complete a rigorous assessment in order to receive the certification or certificate. For programs which

offer a certificate of attendance or participation, it is desirable that there be some mechanism in place for monitoring participants, so that the certificate is awarded only to those who actively participate.

Another quality indicator to look for is whether the program has been accredited or approved by a third-party organization. Accreditation or approval indicates the program has voluntarily submitted itself to an external, independent review and has been found to meet accepted quality standards for certificate or certification programs. For certification programs, look for accreditation by the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA) or the American National Standards Institute (ANSI). If you are considering participating in a program that awards a certificate of attendance or participation, ask if the organization sponsoring the program is an "IACET Authorized Provider" (IACET is the International Association for Continuing Education & Training). As of the publication of this article, there are no established accreditation or approval programs specifically designed for assessment-based certificate programs, but both the National Organization for Competency Assurance (NOCA) and ANSI have expressed intentions to develop such programs.

How Do I Explain the Unique Value of AHA Certification to an Employer?

Both certificate and certification programs can provide the foundation for a successful career. There may be times though, when you want to highlight the unique benefits of your AHA Certification and what distinguishes it from a certificate program. Here are some talking points you can use to showcase your AHA Certification.

- 1. AHA Certification confirms, through a rigorous examination process, that you have mastered the knowledge required for your professional role.* A certificate program may or may not include an assessment to confirm that you have acquired the knowledge or skills that are the focus of program. If it does, the assessment is generally narrower in scope than certification, covering only a subset of the knowledge and skills needed to carry out your professional responsibilities. AHA Certification assesses not what you learned in a single course or series of courses, but rather what you need to know to perform your job competently.
- 2. AHA Certification is a comprehensive verification of your qualifications.* AHA Certification confirms not only that you mastered essential knowledge, but also that you have the academic background and work experience that experts have identified as being necessary for competent performance in your professional role. AHA Certificants are "the total package." Certificate programs do not provide a comprehensive verification of participants' professional qualifications.
- 3. AHA Certification requires that you remain current in the field.* A certificate program helps you to acquire knowledge and skills at a single point in time; it has no mechanism for ensuring that your knowledge and skills will remain current. By contrast, participation in the AHA-CC Certification Renewal process ensures that your knowledge base continues to evolve as the field changes. Your knowledge is up to date and consistent with *today's* requirements for competent performance.
- 4. AHA Certification programs comply with national standards for accreditation.* The programs are developed and administered to comply with standards of both the NCCA and ANSI. As noted earlier, accreditation standards of an independent, third-party are important quality indicators.

(Interested in learning more about how to leverage your AHA Certification? Check out the AHA-CC publication, *Make Your AHA Certification Work for You*, available at:
<http://www.aha.org/aha/Certification-Center/AHA-CC-Resource-Center/0901ccresourcecenter.pdf>)

Quality certificate and certification programs can play an important role in your professional development. Use the information in this article to guide you in selecting the right program for you.