

Understanding Credentials in Texas: Certificates & Certifications

Credentials

Both certificates and certifications are types of **credentials**. *Credential* is a broad term that refers to a verified proficiency or competency and is issued to an individual by a third party that has relevant authority or jurisdiction (U.S. Department of Labor definition, 2010). Third-party entities include accredited education institutions, professional or trade associations, and government agencies, among others. Credentials are often categorized as work credentials, including certifications and licenses, or education credentials, which include educational certificates, diplomas, and degrees (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

This brief aims to clarify the important differences between the terms *certificate* and *certification*. Mistakenly, these two terms often are used interchangeably across higher education, K-12, and workforce sectors.

Definitions

Certificates

A **certificate** is a formal award granted by an institution of higher education (IHE) certifying the satisfactory completion of a higher education program. Upon completion, a certificate is valid without further action on the individual's part. They are usually awarded in workforce education areas by public and private two-year institutions. In Texas, certificates can have different levels, often based on the number of hours required by the program.

- **Level I certificate:** awarded for completing a program consisting of at least 15 and no more than 42 semester credit hours
- **Level II certificate:** awarded for completing a program of at least 30 but not more than 51 semester credit hours
- **Advanced Technical Certificate:** 16-50 hours and a previously awarded associate degree, a previously awarded bachelor's degree, or junior status toward a baccalaureate, depending on the program
- Shorter certificates, including **Enhanced Skills** and **Occupational Skills Certificates:** generally 9-15 hours. (Note that these shorter certificates do not count toward the completion goal of the state's 60x30TX strategic plan.)

Certificates have shown the largest growth among college credentials over the past 30 years, according to a 2013 study by the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce¹. A survey from the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) found that 8 percent of adults in the U.S. held a certificate in 2016².

Certifications and Licenses

A **certification** is a validation that an individual possesses certain skills, usually related to an occupation and measured against a set of accepted standards. An occupation may have multiple certifications, with different levels of expertise. An individual earns a certification by successfully passing a test or battery of tests.

Certifications are not administered by an institution of higher education; instead, certifications are administered by a certification body, usually an organization such as a trade association or industry-approved testing entity. Certifications are often time-limited credentials, where individuals need to meet ongoing requirements to maintain the currency of the certification.

An NCES survey found that 6 percent of U.S. adults reported having an active certification in 2016, and these certifications were more common among college degree earners than those with less education. The most common occupational fields of certification holders included healthcare and business management and operations².

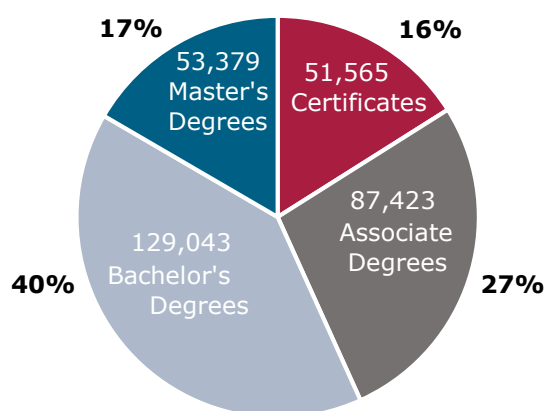
A license is a credential awarded by a *government agency* that establishes one's legal authority to perform a specific job³. Examples include cosmetology, plumbing, and medical licenses. An educational certificate or degree often prepares individuals to obtain a license.

Reporting

Certificates

In Texas, certificates are reported by institutions of higher education to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB). As part of the state's 60x30TX higher education strategic plan, Texas aims to award at least 550,000 certificates and associate, bachelor's, and master's degrees in 2030. The THECB counts level I, level II, and advanced technical certificates toward this completion goal. Enhanced skills' and occupational skills' certifications are *not* counted in the 60x30TX completion goal.

In 2016, Texas IHEs awarded over 51,000 certificates, 16% of the credentials counted in the 60x30TX completion goal



Certifications and Licenses

Schools and districts report industry-recognized certifications to the Texas Education Agency (TEA) as part of the Carl D. Perkins Consolidated Annual Report (CAR) and for the state's K-12 public school accountability system. Historically, teachers report the number of certification exams taken/passed by career and technical education (CTE) concentrators to TEA through the Perkins Program Effectiveness Report (PER) for federal accountability. Beginning in the 2017-18 school year, districts will be required to report student-level data to TEA about industry-based certifications earned that are eligible for acknowledgment in the K-12 public school state accountability system. For more information on industry-based certifications that count toward the state's K-12 public school accountability system, please visit <http://ow.ly/ovWR30fKMMh>.

Institutions of higher education obtain some information regarding their students' attempts at certifications and licensure. This information comes directly from the entities administering the tests and/or from students. The institutions report certification information to THECB, but these awards are not counted toward the state's 60x30TX completion goal. The THECB also reports certifications to the U.S. Department of Education as part of Perkins CAR.

Below are examples of certificates and certifications. These credentials are not mutually exclusive, as many certificate holders also obtain certifications and/or licenses in their respective fields. Note that many fields offer certificate levels (e.g. heating, air conditioning, and refrigeration programs offer both level I and level II certificates).

Examples

Certificates:

- Level I Certificate in Business Administration
- Level II Certificate in Heating, Air Conditioning, and Refrigeration
- Level I Manufacturing Technology Certificate
- Level II Accounting Clerk Certificate
- Advanced Technical Certificate in Diagnostic Medical Sonography
- Child Development Enhanced Skills Certificate
- Beginning Bookkeeping Occupational Skills Award

Certifications:

- Certified Plumbing Level I
- Certified Welder (CW)
- Certified International Information Systems Security Professional (CISSP)
- Certified Public Accountant (CPA)
- Project Management Professional (PMP)
- Certified Logistics Technician (CLT)
- Certified Medical Assistant (CMA)
- Certified Masonry Level I

¹Carnevale, A. P., Rose, S. J., & Hanson, A. R. (2013). *Certificates: Gateway to gainful employment and college degrees*. Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.

²Cronen, S., McQuiggan, M., and Isenberg, E. (2017). *Adult training and education: Results from the National Household Education Surveys Program of 2016* (NCES 2017-103), National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC. Retrieved 09/18/2017 from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch>.

³See definition from the Interagency Working Group on Expanded Measures of Enrollment and Attainment (GEMEnA) at <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/gemena/definitions.asp>.