

INTRODUCTION

Certification and licensure tests have a number of elements in common, along with a few important differences. Both types of tests are criterion-referenced tests (CRTs) and both are used to measure the knowledge and skills related to particular jobs. While the terms are not used with complete consistency, the term certification most often refers to a voluntary exam program sponsored by an agency related to the occupation, for the purpose of measuring professional competency. In contrast, the term licensure usually refers to a government-sponsored program that an individual is legally required to complete, before he or she can be employed in the occupation. The two types of tests may also differ in terms of their overall test purposes and in the additional requirements the sponsoring agency may have for the candidates.

COMPARISONS OF CERTIFICATION AND LICENSURE TESTS

Test Purposes

Certification and licensure programs typically have different primary test purposes. Certification tests are often designed to measure a broad set of knowledge and skills which an individual working in a particular occupation ought to have. In many instances, a professional organization has developed a set of standards for professional practice and the certification exam is designed to measure these standards. While certification tests may be designed to measure entry level skills, or minimal competency, they may also be aimed at a specialty level, or an advanced level of professional practice. In licensure programs, on the other hand, the focus of the test is directly on protecting health, safety, and welfare. Licensure tests are usually aimed at protecting public safety by ensuring a minimum degree of competency on the part of the candidates.

Sponsoring Agency Requirements

Perhaps the most obvious difference between certification and licensure programs is whether they are voluntary or mandatory for the examinees. Certification tests are usually optional programs designed for the purpose of measuring professional competency; they may be sponsored by associations, corporations, or academic institutions. While certification tests are legally voluntary, passing such an exam is sometimes required by an employer before an individual can be hired or promoted.



Government-sponsored licensure tests, on the other hand, are typically legally mandatory for any individual who wishes to be employed in the job or profession.

Both certification and licensure programs often have specific eligibility requirements for the candidate, and they are both usually granted for a specific, limited time period (e.g., five years, ten years). In addition, both types of programs often have ongoing requirements for the individual to maintain the certification or license. These ongoing requirements might include continuing education and/or retesting.

Summary

While both certification and licensure tests are designed to measure examinee competence in some job-related area, there are important distinctions. These include whether the primary purpose of the test is concerned with professional competence or public safety and whether the exam is voluntary or mandatory for the examinee.

