



Certification vs. Certificate – What’s the Difference?

Earning a *professional credential*, such as those offered through BCEN’s [CEN®](#), [CPEN®](#), [CFRN®](#), [CTRN®](#) and [TCRN®](#) *national board certification programs*, and completing *certificate programs* such as ACLS, PALS, ENPC, TNCC, and [BCEN EDvantage](#) (designed by BCEN to prepare and accelerate nurse entry into the ED workplace), are critical to the work emergency nurses do. However, there are significant differences between the two.

	Certification Programs	Certificate Programs
Purpose	Validate knowledge, skills, and expertise across entire specialty practice area.	Learn, practice or demonstrate knowledge or proficiency in a focused topic, subject or skill set.
Outcome	Professional credential signifying the individual is board certified in a specialty.	Certificate or proof of completion card and/or CE hours.
Essential to Safe and Professional Practice	Yes	Yes
Awarding Organization	Independent credentialing bodies	Varies
Nationally Recognized	Yes	Most
Portable	Yes	Varies. Nurses may be required to take employer-sponsored or employer-approved offering.
Eligibility Requirements	Strict and nationally standardized. Most require RN licensure, as well as relevant direct or indirect clinical experience. ¹	Varies. Clinical experience or RN licensure may or may not be required.
Preparation/Course of Study	Independently designed. Spans weeks or months. Prep materials and review courses developed by professional organizations and dedicated certification prep providers.	Class or course offered over several hours to several days, in person or online. Content can vary by instructor and/or provider.
Culminates in Exam or Practicum	Yes Rigorous, comprehensive, nationally standardized exam, offered in a secure testing facility. Based on national role delineation studies to ensure relevance to clinical practice specialty area. Psychometrically sound and legally defensible.	Sometimes Content can vary. Test or practicum hosted by sponsoring organization and/or offered online.
Renewal/Recertification Frequency & Requirements	Every 4 years, on average. ¹ Retake certification exam or accrue required continuing education (CE)/contact hours.	Renewal frequency varies. May be used toward certification program CE requirements.
Eligible for Accreditation by ABSNC² or NCCA³	Yes Accreditation by these independent, third parties validates the certification program has met recognized national and international credentialing industry standards.	No Certificate program/CE providers may be accredited or sanctioned by industry organizations or certificate program sponsor organizations.

¹American Board of Nursing Specialties (ABNS) Member Organization Annual Survey Data, 2019.

²Accreditation Board for Specialty Nursing Certifications. ³National Commission for Certifying Agencies.