

Credentialing - *What's in a name? A lot.*

Jane Weissman, Executive Director
Interstate Renewable Energy Council

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Certification, certificate, accreditation, licensing - all terms we hear and use. However, each one is different, conveying that a different set of criteria, requirements and achievements have been met. There is often confusion among these designations as they are used interchangeably and frequently incorrectly.

First, the term *Credentialing* is a general term that includes certification, certificate, accreditation, and licensure.

Professional certification is a voluntary process by which a nongovernmental agency or association awards recognition to an individual who has met certain predetermined requirements and qualifications specified by that agency or association.* Recipients are required to demonstrate competence according to professional standards. The key words are *voluntary* (unlike mandatory government licensing), *individual* (certification is not for a company or an educational program) and *professional standards*. Certification can also apply to a product.

Certification is usually not awarded indefinitely. A person is awarded the credential for a certain period of time -- a year, two, three or more. Assessment is on-going. There are additional requirements to become re-certified, which usually include professional development such as continuing education courses, proof of continued practice in the field and, in some cases, a re-certification exam. The certifying body can suspend or revoke the award if there are infringements of policies or ethics.

Now, let's take a look at a **certificate**. A certificate is issued after an individual completes something such as a class or series of courses. There are certificates of attendance or participation or curriculum-based certificates. An assessment-based certificate demonstrates accomplishment of intended learning outcomes. A "certificate" is a one-time statement about an individual; a snap shot defining an accomplishment. It does not follow the person through their career. There is no tracking or additional requirements to meet. When someone receives a certificate, it does **not** mean they are certified.

One who is awarded professional certification status is known as a Certificant.

One who completes a certificate program is known as a Certificate Holder.

One way of looking at certification and certificate programs is that a certificate holder shows specific knowledge they have learned in a course; a certificant demonstrates knowledge and skill from experience.

Now enters **accreditation**. This is also a voluntary process by which a nongovernmental agency grants time-limited recognition to an institution (such as a school or college), laboratory, organization, business, or other entity after verifying that it has met predetermined qualifications standards. Accreditation is not for an individual.

Licensure refers to a mandatory system of standards, usually controlled by state government, to which a practitioner must conform in order to practice a given profession.

Within the renewable energy community, the North American Board of Certified Energy Practitioners offers two professional certifications (for the PV Installer and Solar Thermal Installer) (www.nabcep.org). The Interstate Renewable Energy Council is the North American Licensee for the ISPE Standard for Accreditation & Certification of renewable energy training program and instructors (www.ispeusa.org). Others offer certification and certificate programs. Please remember that being awarded a professional certification or successful completion of a certificate program does not replace any local or state licensing or other requirements.

**Source: The NOCA Guide to Understanding Credentialing Concepts*