

**E**ducation- and work-related credentials are important milestones for many people's career and education pathways. The word credential encompasses educational certificates and degrees, industry certifications, government-issued licenses, Registered Apprenticeship certificates and badges, among other terms. These credentials verify an individual's qualifications or competence and are issued by a relevant third party.

**The definitions provided in this fact sheet describe commonly awarded credentials. Your institution, agency or organization may have additional categories of credentials or define these terms differently.**

# What is a Credential?

## Certificate

An educational certificate is awarded for the successful completion of a brief course of study, usually one year or less but sometimes up to two years in length, primarily by a public or private two-year or four-year institution of higher education, a college's workforce development or extension division, or a non-degree-granting institution like a public area career and technical center. No action is needed to maintain a certificate.

## Degree

An academic degree is awarded for the successful completion of a course of study, usually multiple years in length, primarily by a public or private two-year or four-year institution of higher education. Degrees are available at the associate, bachelor's, master's and doctoral levels. No action is needed to maintain a degree.

## Certification

An industry certification indicates mastery of specific knowledge, skills or processes that can be measured against a set of standards. Certifications are not tied to a specific educational program but are typically awarded through assessment and validation of skills by an employer, trade association or other industry group. Individuals may need to meet requirements to maintain a certification, such as continuing education coursework, re-assessment, demonstrated work experience and/or earning higher level certifications.

## License

A license is legal authorization, typically granted by a government agency, that allows an individual to perform certain regulated tasks or occupations. A license can be obtained by meeting requirements set forth by the licenser, such as completing a course of study, completing assessments and/or gaining work experience. License holders must meet requirements to renew a license, which may include continuing education coursework or demonstrated work experience.

## Registered Apprenticeship Certificate

A Registered Apprenticeship is a paid on-the-job learning experience, paired with supplemental classroom instruction, offered by employers and joint labor-management organizations and approved and validated by the U.S. Department of Labor or a state apprenticeship agency. Registered Apprenticeships develop skills for a specific occupation and employer and result in a nationally recognized certificate of completion. No action is needed to maintain this credential.

## Badge

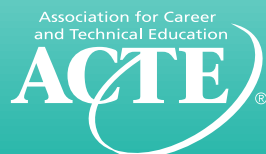
A digital badge represents an individual's attainment of a credential or a micro-credential, which is typically earned by completing a single project, course or assessment. Badges are issued by a variety of organizations, including educational institutions, trade and professional associations and employers, and include digital metadata such as criteria for earning the badge, the badge expiration date and issuer information. An individual may need to meet requirements to maintain a badge, and a badge may expire owing to advancements in an industry or career field.



# What is a Credential?

	CERTIFICATE	DEGREE	CERTIFICATION	LICENSE	REGISTERED APPRENTICESHIP CERTIFICATE	BADGE
<b>Awarded by...</b>	Educational institution	Educational institution	Trade association, employer	Government agency	Government agency	Variable
<b>Results from...</b>	Course of study	Course of study	Assessment	Variable	On-the-job training, course of study	Variable
<b>Indicates...</b>	Education	Education	Skill mastery	Legal authorization	Skill mastery, professional experience	Variable
<b>Completed in...</b>	≤2 years	2+ years	Variable	Variable	1+ years	Variable
<b>Must be maintained...</b>	No	No	Potentially	Yes	No	Potentially
<b>Examples...</b>	Cuyahoga Community College Paramedic Certificate, Davidson-Davie Community College Sustainable Agriculture Certificate, Lorain County Community College Computer Animation Certificate, Emily Griffith Technical College Dental Assisting Certificate	Associate of Applied Science, Bachelor of Arts, Master of Science, Doctor of Education	National Roofing Contractors Association PROCertification®, CTIA Wireless Industry Service Excellence (WISE) Technician Certification, CompTIA A+ Certification, National Retail Federation Foundation RISE Up Certification	Registered Nurse, teacher, cosmetologist, general contractor	NAFRI Wildland Firefighter Apprenticeship, BlueCross BlueShield of South Carolina IT Apprenticeship, Hypertherm CNC Machinist Apprenticeship, AHLA-NRAEF Hospitality Sector Registered Apprenticeship	Harper College Cisco CCNA Network Specialist Badge, Bucks County Community College OSHA 30-Hour Badge, IBM Cybersecurity Fundamentals Badge, PMI Project Management Professional Badge

This resource is an update of ACTE’s “What is a Credential?” fact sheet, first published in 2015. Additional resources to help you understand the credential ecosystem can be found in ACTE’s High-quality CTE Library Student Assessment section at [acteonline.org/library](http://acteonline.org/library)



## OTHER TERMS

### Recognized Postsecondary Credential

A recognized postsecondary credential is defined in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act as --

*a credential consisting of an industry-recognized certificate or certification, a certificate of completion of an apprenticeship, a license recognized by the State involved or Federal Government, or an associate or baccalaureate degree.*

Educational certificates are included in this definition, as are degrees, industry certifications, licenses and Registered Apprenticeship certificates.

The Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2006, as amended in 2018 by the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act and known as Perkins V, uses this term for accountability indicators and other provisions related to credential attainment.

### Non-degree Credential

A non-degree credential is a credential other than a degree, including educational certificates, industry certifications, licenses, Registered Apprenticeship certificates and badges.

### Stackable Credential

A stackable credential is one of a sequence of non-duplicative credentials that build on each other to advance an individual’s qualifications and help them progress along a career and/or education pathway.

### Portable Credential

A portable credential is a credential that is recognized and accepted in different settings, such as across states, across institutions or across employers.