

## Licensure Versus Certification *What is the Difference?*

Governmental *licensing* is often confused with private credentialing, generally referred to as *certification*, because the meanings of the terms are frequently interchanged. Although some jurisdictions use the term certification as signifying governmental authority to practice a profession, the difference between licensure and certification is essentially the difference between governmental regulation and self-regulation of a profession.

### Licensure

Licensure is the process by which a federal, state or local governmental agency grants an individual permission to practice in a particular occupation or profession that is subject to regulation under the government's authority and to refer to oneself as "licensed" or authorized to practice. The authority of a state to enact law regulating a particular profession is derived from the United States Constitution and conferred on state and local governments. Using this authority, states adopt "practice acts" which create and empower a board to regulate the profession in the interest of public protection. Within the practice acts are mandates for practitioners to become licensed, usually based upon requirements such as education, examination, experience and moral character. These requirements, which vary among jurisdictions, establish one's minimum competence to safely and effectively practice the regulated profession. The practice act also establishes the powers of the board, the scope of practice, and the legal requirement to uphold certain professional and ethical standards.

Obtaining a license in order to practice a profession is *mandatory*, and state laws may provide for criminal or administrative penalties for unlicensed practice. Penalties for violating licensure laws vary from state to state. Periodic licensure renewal is also mandatory and usually premised upon substantiating required continuing education or professional development.

### Certification

Certification is the process by which private organizations recognize individuals for meeting certain criteria established by the private organization in which individuals are recognized for advanced knowledge and skills. It is a form of self-regulation which is *voluntary* in that it is not required of individuals prior to practice and is without governmental oversight. Practitioners seek certification usually as a form of self-promotion and in an attempt to distinguish one practitioner from another. There is no requirement to be certified and no governmental penalties for failure to achieve or loss of certification recognition.

From the consumer perspective, certification is a fact from which a consumer may or may not draw an inference of the quality of a practitioner's work in a given profession. The only potential direct method of public protection is through enforcement by the private organization that confers the certification.

Like licensure, certification is usually granted for a limited period of time and must be renewed based upon criteria set by the private entity.

Certification does not provide a legal mechanism to practice an otherwise governmentally regulated profession, but does provide certificate holders to accurately promote the fact that they are certified by the private entity.

In recent years, there have been efforts to ensure there is a clear delineation between licensure and certification for the massage therapy profession. For instance, the Federation of State Massage Therapy Boards (FSMTB) and the National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork (NCBTMB) worked cooperatively to reach an agreement whereby the NCBTMB no longer provides examinations for licensure purposes as of February 1, 2015, and instead now focuses exclusively on delivering quality certification programs. The Massage and Bodywork Licensing Examination (MBLEx), owned and governed by the FSMTB, is now the exclusive licensure examination.

Initiatives by the FSMTB and NCBTMB seek to further clarify and delineate the unique and valuable differences that both licensure and certification plays in the evolution of the profession.