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Is It Certification, a Certificate Program, or a Certificate of Completion?

Be a Savvy Consumer and Know the Difference

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The term “certification” is used a lot these days and doesn’t always mean the same thing to everyone. Programs referred to as certifications by a variety of providers do not always represent the same level of achievement. For example, some providers label attendance at continuing education (CE) programs as “certification” and tell the participants that they may call themselves “certified” in a defined area of practice upon completion of the program. Those who have passed a comprehensive broad-based certification examination, such as the OCN® test, know that attendance at a weekend CE program does not represent the same level of achievement. Nurses, as consumers of these programs, need to understand what each type of program represents in order to make wise decisions about the programs in which they invest. Nurses often spend their own money to become certified or attend CE programs. Employers also invest in these programs. Both nurses and employers need to be able to assess programs so that they fully understand what they are consuming and do not misrepresent themselves or those they employ as “certified” when they are not.

The Institute for Credentialing Excellence (ICE), a membership association for certifying organizations with an accreditation arm for certification programs, has published a document that defines the features of quality certification and assessment-based certificate programs. ONCC subscribes to these definitions.

Certification

ICE defines professional certification as the voluntary process by which a non-governmental entity grants a time-limited recognition and use of a credential to an individual after verifying that he or she has met predetermined and standardized criteria. Certification is the process by which individuals are assessed against predetermined standards for knowledge, skills, and competencies and granted a time-limited credential. The primary purpose of certification is assessment (e.g., a multiple choice examination) that is independent of a specific course of study or educational provider. The assessment generally evaluates mastery of the knowledge and skills required to competently perform in a profession or occupation or to provide a specific service. Certification programs, because of their broad nature, are not tied to a specific course of study or an educational course, curriculum, or provider. Certification may be required for regulatory purposes or may have a significant impact on (or may be required for) hiring, promotion, and other employment-related outcomes. Examples of high-quality certification programs include all of the ONCC certifications as well as many others that have received accreditation from the American Board of Nursing Specialties or the National Commission for Certifying Agencies.

Assessment-Based Certificate Program

An assessment-based certificate program is a relatively short, non-degree granting program that provides instruction and training to aid participants in acquiring knowledge, skills, and competencies and designates that participants have passed an end-of-program assessment (test) derived from the course objectives. Assessment-based certificate programs typically cover a relatively narrow set of knowledge, skills, and competencies associated with fulfillment of a role, completion of a process, support of a product, provision of a service, or fulfillment of CE requirements. Although assessment is an integral part of the certificate program, the primary purpose is to provide instruction and training. Certificate programs generally are not required for regulatory purposes and do not

have a significant impact on hiring, promotion, and other key employment outcomes. An example of a high-quality certificate program is ONS's Chemotherapy and Biotherapy Course.

Certificate of Attendance or Participation

A certificate of attendance is issued after an individual attends or participates in an educational program. The certificate indicates only that the individual attended the program. Usually, knowledge at the end of the program is not assessed, although participants may be required to complete an evaluation of the program to obtain a certificate of completion. These certificates most often are used to document that an individual has attained CE in a specific content area.

In nursing, one way to judge the quality of a CE program is to determine whether the program is accredited or approved by an accredited approver. Accrediting bodies have set standards and criteria for quality CE programs, and only the programs that meet those standards and criteria receive accreditation. Only accredited CE programs meet the criteria for recertification through ONC-PRO. Nurses should be savvy consumers and determine if a CE program is accredited before attending the program. All CE programs provided by ONS and APHON are accredited nursing CE programs. Examples of high-quality CE programs are the annual ONS Congress and the annual APHON conference.

In summary, nurses, employers, and others who may invest in certification, certificate programs, or CE should be wise consumers and understand the ramifications of the programs in which they invest. All three types of programs have an important role to play in the professional development of nurses. However, consumers should be sure that the providers of the programs are not misrepresenting the programs. Nurses also should be sure to represent themselves appropriately upon completion of a program.